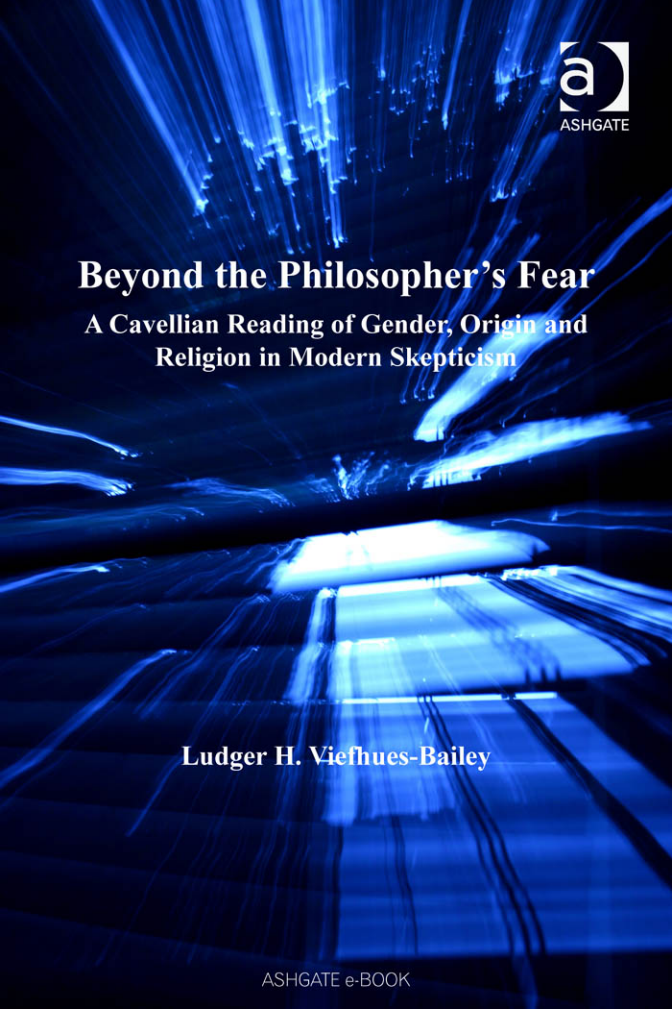
ASHGATE
Beyond the Philosopher's Fear
A Cavellian Reading of Gender, Origin and Religion in Modern Skepticism
Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey
ASHGATE e-BOOK

BEYOND THE PHILOSOPHER'S FEAR

Beyond the Philosopher's Fear is I believe the first extended study published of my writing that brings to it a systematically religious perspective. I find the result heartening and productive, in two principal ways. First, this perspective allows a continuous stance from which to look back, as from its beyond, on the writing's claims to the philosophical, to follow its intent to enter and sustain philosophy's questioning of itself, of ourselves. Second, this perspective, in Ludger Viefhues-Bailey's scrupulous and ambitious undertaking, allows for the trajectory of half a century of writing to be taken as, let us say, one unfolding project, something always ahead of itself, unfinished, from various beginnings to various ends, perpetually – so far as talent has permitted it to be – tentative, exploratory, meditative. It joins the circle of reflections on these years of work – and extensions along the lines of it, and points of departure from it – for which I feel the clearest gratitude.

Professor Emeritus Stanley Cavell,
Department of Philosophy, Harvard University

INTERSECTIONS: CONTINENTAL AND ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

In recent years, the familiar division within modern Western philosophy between what are commonly called its 'analytical' and its 'Continental' forms has been questioned from both sides of the divide. A new generation of philosophers, often benefiting from a far more pluralistic training in the history and methods of both 'traditions', have begun to work in ways which promise to make the terms of this traditional division irrelevant.

This new series, Intersections, is intended to provide a home and a platform for the best examples of philosophical research that seeks to expound the founding texts of 'Continental philosophy' with all the critical tools that 'analytical philosophy' makes available. It also seeks to explore the unfamiliar but challenging conceptions and standards of rigorous thinking that 'Continental philosophy' is founded upon. The series gathers together exciting new studies from philosophers well-versed in, and sympathetic to, both 'traditions', presenting a cluster of titles on key topics in contemporary philosophy which move towards rendering the traditional Continental–analytic divide irrelevant. The series aims to help to hasten the demise of a profoundly damaging internal discord that is, in large part, based on mutual misunderstanding.

Beyond the Philosopher's Fear

A Cavellian Reading of Gender, Origin and Religion in Modern Skepticism

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To My Parents

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List of Abbreviations

AT	*Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*
CHU	*Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*
CR	*The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*
CT	*Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*
DK	*Disowning Knowledge*
IQO	*In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*
MWM	*Must We Mean What We Say?*
Pitch	*A Pitch of Philosophy*
POH	*Pursuits of Happiness*
SOW	*Senses of Walden*
WV	*The World Viewed*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This is a book about the philosophy of Stanley Cavell; the role gender plays in his work; and the significance of a renewed religious imagination for the task of overcoming the life of skepticism.[1] By addressing the issues of skepticism, gender,

1 For a quick overview of Cavell's work see: Hilary Putnam, 'Introducing Cavell,' in Ted Cohen (ed.), *Pursuits of Reason. Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University, 1993), pp. vii–xii. Recently, Cavell's work has begun to attract the deserved attention both in Germany and in France: cf. The 'Schwerpunkt Cavell' in: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophy*, 46 (1998); Sandra Laugier, 'Lire Cavell,' *Archives de Philosophie*, 61.1 (1998): 5–32. Doménach, Élise, 'Stanley Cavell: Les chemins de la reconnaissance,' in *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 96 (1998): 496–511. The following titles are book-length studies of Cavell's work: Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989) connects Cavell's treatment of skepticism with poststructuralist literary theorists and philosophers like Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, and Stanley Fish. Richard Fleming, *The State of Philosophy. An Invitation to a Reading in Three Parts of Stanley Cavell's The Claim of Reason* (London and Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1993). Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell. Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Fleming gives a detailed reading of Cavell's magnum opus, *The Claim of Reason*. Mulhall provides the most systematic reading of Cavell's entire work available at present. Timothy Gould, *Hearing Things. Voice and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Gould uncovers a connection between the voice within Cavell's writing and the voices Cavell appeals to through the methods of ordinary language philosophy. Gould demonstrates that out of these very questions of voice and method Cavell constructed a new model of philosophical method, based on elements of the act of reading. Recently, two important collections of essays on Cavell have appeared: Russell B. Goodman (ed.), *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Richard Eldridge, *Stanley Cavell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The essays touch on the issues of Cavell's relationship to Romanticism; his struggle with the disciplinary confinements of philosophy; his work on drama, opera, literature, and movies; his vision of normativity in language and the role criteria play in the construction of skepticism; his understanding of ethics; and his insistence on American philosophy. These volumes present an important step in the reception of Cavell's work; yet more needs to be done. For example, a meaningful discussion of Cavell's work on film or theater is absent in the collection in the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophy.* I agree with Stephen Mulhall's assessment that R. Fleming's and M. Payne's collection of articles edited as *The Senses of Stanley Cavell* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), while addressing literary themes and cinema in Cavell's work, do not provide a sustained evaluation of those themes and their philosophical roots in Cavell's thinking 'in any real depth.' As an example see, Richard P. Wheeler's 'Acknowledging Shakespeare: Cavell and the Claim of the Human' in Fleming and Payne's volume. The same is true, says Mulhall, for the limited focus of Fischer, M., *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, p.

and religion, and by doing so in the context of Cavell's work, the following pages inevitably provoke the issue of what are the outlines and characteristics of philosophy. Cavell's work raises this question again and again; with its halting and excruciatingly complex sentences; its turn to literature, opera, film, and lately dance; and with the celebration of the 'feminine' voice as therapy for the skeptical worry. How can this be philosophy? [2] Or, in contrast, how could philosophy be itself without these turns? And, finally, where could we find thinking – in Cavell's Emersonian understanding – if not on the borders of modern philosophy – including its border to religious imagination? These fundamental questions arise for Cavell out of a meticulous reading of Wittgenstein and Austin in his own analysis of modern skepticism. Likewise, the questions of gender and religion, which – as I will argue – Cavell's work provokes, are intrinsically linked to his understanding of language and of our roles as speakers. Before we begin however tracing the Cavellian vision of language with a discussion of Wittgensteinian and Austinian criteria in this chapter, let me describe the somewhat broader philosophical context in which I read Cavell's work.

What makes Cavell's oeuvre important for contemporary philosophy, why should philosophers care about his reflections on the feminine, and how does religion become an issue for his thinking?

To address these questions I will first say something about Cavell's ability to connect Anglo-Saxon and Continental philosophical concerns surrounding language; secondly, I will introduce Cavell's understanding of skepticism and how it relates to issues of gender; finally, I will say something about his Freudian conception of the feminine and how it expresses (and conceals) a religious problem. I will not, however, provide a *status questionis* of the issue of gender in Cavell. This is partially due to the fact that, until now, this topic has not received sustained attention among the interpreters of Cavell, as I will show. Moreover, this book wants to argue that the urgency of the question of gender and religion arises only out of a look at Cavell's philosophical project as a whole. To this end, the chapters of this book will trace

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viii). Fischer's work examines the impact of Cavell's work on contemporary poststructuralist literary theory. Both the Eldridge and the Goodman volumes on the other hand thematize his important stand on Cavell's work. Notably absent is, however, the issue of gender.

2 How can we count as a well-argued contribution to philosophy the meandering *Claim of Reason* (*CR*) with its baffling or ironic attempt to give a table of contents, or how can his excursions to literature or his evocation of Greta Garbo contribute to our theories of knowledge? Richard Fleming writes after dissecting on 150 pages the argumentative structure of the *CR*: 'An understanding of *The Claim of Reason* cannot help but produce a feeling of disappointment with the argument of *The Claim of Reason* ... Cavell, himself, shows constant dissatisfaction with what he does in the text' (Fleming, *The State of Philosophy*, p. 151f.). One is left still constantly in search for the 'lived context' in which this argument can come to life, writes Fleming. On the other hand, Stephen Mulhall takes this beginning of the *CR*, to be expressive of Cavell's broader question of how to begin (with newness) in philosophy, in 'On Refusing to Begin,' in Russell B. Goodman (ed.), *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 22–36. As we will see, Cavell's work confronts the reader with a *particular vision of philosophy*, one in which reading 'requires from first to last that one take the time to try the claims on oneself' (*IQO*, p. 120).

the main subjects of Cavell's work – from his interpretations of Wittgenstein, Shakespeare, and Emerson to his work on film and opera. The introduction will thus end with an overview of these chapters.

Cavell: Between the Continentals and the Analytics

Cavell locates himself on the intersection between the Continental and the Anglo-Saxon traditions: 'Something like the healing of the rift between the English and the German traditions of philosophy – or failing that the witnessing of it – has ... been a motive of my writing from its earliest to its later installments.'[3] What characterizes this rift? Jean-Jacques Lecercle describes, with reference to Deleuze and Guattari, the differences between Continental and analytic philosophers in the following way: the analytic project presupposes a picture in which language is primarily aimed at conveying information between cooperating individuals who are fully in control of their linguistic utterances. This vision of language 'reduces the social element to the strategic choices of a group of individual subjects.' The eminently social reality of natural language is thus understood as produced by the choices, and this means intentions, of individual speakers. The trans-individual element in language is then called 'grammar' and it is treated as 'an innate faculty of the mind (the faculty of language that produces a Chomskyan universal grammar), a faculty that is present in each individual on the basis of his or her humanity.'[4] The Continental traditions, on the other hand, see language not as a field of irenic cooperation of innately competent language users. Language is rather a site of conflict between speakers who are simultaneously subjected to and responsible for their common language.[5]

Varying both the analytic individualism and Continental theme of language as a site of relationship, Cavell's work probes the picture of a human self in linguistic relationships and of language as maintained by a human self in relation. These relationships are neither abstract nor irenic. Rather, they are characterized by desire and contention. Not unlike some erotic affairs, our linguistic intercourses can become the site of violence. The dangerous and fulfilling liaisons of heterosexual couples provide therefore (and not surprisingly) the examples for Cavell's analysis of the perils and promises of language use. Similarly, the desire for communion and for aversion, characterize our relationships in language. As we will see, *we* come into being as and how we speak in Cavell's vision of language.

A philosophical refusal to account for this relationality in and of language is itself an act of avoidance of being in a relationship, according to Cavell. He is keenly aware that it is incorrect to see language as a commodity that – while more or less unequally distributed in practice – is *in principle* equally accessible to everyone regardless of gender, race, or social location. In contrast, Cavell's work allows us to

3 Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden. An Expanded Edition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1972]), p. 149.

4 Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 'Philosophies du langage analytique et continentale: de la scène de ménage à la méprise créatrice,' *Le Décline de La Philosophie Analytique. L'Aventure Humaine. Savoirs, Libertés, Pourvoirs*, 9 (1999): 11–22, p. 17f. English translation mine.

5 Cf. Lecercle, 'Philosophies du langage analytique et continentale,' p. 21.

ask: How gendered is the world that our words reflect? Is this a 'masculine world' – a world in which women are forced to inhabit imaginative spaces that are the product of male fantasies and fears?[6] Are there words for the experiences of women? Cavell raises these questions not only in his discussions of skepticism and Shakespearean drama (for example, are there words for Cordelia to express her love for Lear?). His attention to the skeptical problem and his close reading of Wittgenstein allows Cavell to develop a vision of language that inevitably leads to these issues of gender and violence in speaking. In so doing, he connects Anglo-Saxon philosophy's linguistic concerns with themes reflected upon in other places in the academy (for example, in the corpus of cultural theory, feminist studies, and in the blending of Freudian psychology and Continental philosophy).

Cavell on Skepticism and Gender?

At the center of Cavell's philosophical enterprise stands his engagement with what Cavell calls the 'pervasiveness of the threat of skepticism,' a philosophical position that he understands to be the 'opening gesture in modern philosophy' (*AT*, p. 1). Admittedly, Cavell uses 'skepticism' in a very broad sense. He understands it as both the denial that we can know with certainty *and* the desire to refute this denial. In a more conventional understanding 'skepticism is the denial of knowledge.'[7] Here, the skeptic is thought of as a person who says something like 'You don't have any knowledge,' or 'You don't have any empirical knowledge,' or 'You don't know what is going on in someone else's mind.'[8] For Cavell, however, not only the denial of our having epistemic certainty, but the whole quest for epistemic

6 Diane Jonte-Pace, *Speaking the Unspeakable. Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud's Cultural Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 141. Jonte-Pace's *Speaking the Unspeakable*, for example, explores how Freudian imagery of woman violently reappears in contemporary American culture. In the epilogue to her book, Jonte-Pace describes a collection of bizarre web pages promoting violence and 'revenge' against women. She cautions us not to dismiss these and similar phenomena as simply representing extreme examples from the mad fringes of the Internet and society. Rather, as Jonte-Pace writes, these productions act out an (otherwise repressed but omnipresent) desire for violence against the woman (and the mother in particular). She sees this violence reflected in the Freudian understanding of self and more generally implied in modern visions of subjectivity. Observations like these provoke the question of what words are available for women to express their experiences in a world captivated by the association of mother, woman, the uncanny, and death. What visions of self are prepared for women to inhabit?

7 Putnam, 'Introducing Cavell,' p. vii.

8 Keith DeRose's formalization of the argument of what he calls the skeptical hypothesis gives an apt description of a standard understanding of skepticism (Keith DeRose, 'Introduction: Responding to Skepticism,' in Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield (eds), *Skepticism. A Contemporary Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 2). In this formalization: '*O* is a proposition one would *or*dinarily think one knows, and *H* is a suitably chosen skeptical *hy*pothesis: The Argument by Skeptical Hypothesis: 1. I don't know that not-H; 2. If I don't know that not-H, then I don't know that O; So, C. I don't know that O.'

certainty itself is a philosophical expression of the skeptical impulse.[9] Thus, the very philosophical attempts trying to refute the skeptical challenge, such as the projects of the metaphysical realists or the positivists, are themselves forms of skepticism. The underlying idea is that skepticism is motivated by a deep-seated dissatisfaction with what the skeptic perceives as our human epistemic condition. This however is a dissatisfaction that we should not simply dismiss. Rather, the skeptic's plight of mind reveals a frightening truth, as Cavell writes:

> Horror is the title I am giving to the perception of the precariousness of human identity, to the perception that it may be lost or invaded, that we may be, or may become, something other than we are, or take ourselves for; *that our origins as human beings need accounting for, and are unaccountable*. [*CR*, p. 418, italics added]

The skeptical impulse is thus best understood as a desire to recoil from the truth in skepticism. The skeptic wishes to leave behind a precarious epistemological position – a position that would reveal in turn the precarious nature of our identities and origins. In Cavell's reading, the skeptic sees that the origin of what counts as our humanity involves a sense of self and identity that is fraught with ambiguity and fear. In this analysis, skepticism is simultaneously the philosophical denial of this very fear and its expression.

Cavell's dealings with skepticism are interlaced with his reflections on what constitutes modern philosophy and how it borders literature, film, drama, and opera. By crossing and exploring these borders Cavell thematizes (and struggles with) the worry that the modern project of philosophy is expressive of, and fueled by, masculine conceptions of knowledge, which inevitably lead to violence against women. Is Othello's murderousness a perspicuous representation of the consequences of the skeptic's frustrated desire for knowledge? Does the skeptical obsession with certainty express a *human* or a *male* fear – a fear that is related to masculine constructions of language and self? Is skepticism a human problem addressed and solved by philosophy, or is skepticism part of the production of male ways of knowing encoded in philosophy? Cavell explicitly raises this question, yet his answers remain ambiguous. He talks about the (in his understanding) traumatic 'possibility that philosophical skepticism is inflected, if not altogether determined by gender, by whether one sets oneself aside as masculine or feminine. And if philosophical skepticism is thus inflected then, according to me, philosophy as such will be' (*CT*, p. 100). However, it is not clear from his writings how he answers this traumatic question. At times he states that skepticism is a 'male affair' (*Pitch*, p. 169); yet at other times he writes that skepticism is a human problem (*CT*, p. 94). His wavering is easy to understand: if skepticism and its pursuit of knowledge is the center around which modern philosophy revolves, and if this problem is an expression of male issues of self and gender, then modern philosophy revolves around and aims at solving male problems.

Both the Goodman and Eldridge volumes bring attention to the philosophical importance of Cavell's dealings with literature, drama, film, and opera; yet neither book contains a section or even an article on the issue of gender in his work. This

9 In DeRose's scheme, the desire to disprove 1 expresses skepticism according to Cavell.

is surprising since the reflections on the feminine play such an important role in Cavell's writings about Shakespeare, Hollywood comedies or dramas, and operas.[10] Despite the prominent role that gender plays for Cavell, currently no monograph addresses in a systematic manner the problematic issues of gendered speaking and gendered knowledge in the context of his philosophy as a whole.[11] Feminist philosophers of film have dedicated the clearest attention to Cavell's constructions of gender. Despite the deep sympathy some philosophers, such Naomi Scheman, feel for Cavell's work, his Freudian constructions of gender pose severe problems for most. Summarizing his work's reception in feminist film theory, Cynthia Freeland describes this difficulty: 'Cavell's work is not without problems for feminists who have disagreed about its usefulness for philosophical reflections about gender roles, social relations, or the social values reflected in marriage.' While Cavell offers a basis to critique traditional constructions of gender, his notion of the feminine is too easily co-opted by masculinist interests, as Scheman points out.[12] This is a difficulty illustrated by Tania Modleski's exasperated reaction to Cavell's writings on film.[13] Modleski sees Cavell as part of an attempt of male academics 'to relocate the struggle of feminism against patriarchy to a place entirely within patriarchy and within the psyche of the patriarch himself' (p. 10). In his reply to Modleski, Cavell does not fully address this point. He feels that Modleski refuses to acknowledge that it deeply worries him that his Emersonianism might 'serve once more to eradicate the feminine difference' (*CT*, p. 33). While I feel that Cavell is indeed genuinely troubled, I will show how Cavell's Freudian symbolism of gender invites, despite himself, a feminist reading such as Modleski's. For example, Cavell's idea that the 'feminine' voice can be realized by all of us, independent of whether we take ourselves to be men or women, still operates within problematic psychoanalytic assumptions of gender. Thus, while Cavell provides the conceptual space needed for a gender analysis of skepticism (and hence modern philosophy), his understanding of gender and his own use of a Freudian symbolism of gender need a systematic and critical exploration.

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10 Surprisingly silent on question of gender is Irène Théry, 'L'énigme de l'égalité, mariage et différence des sexes dans A la recherche du bonheur,' in Sandra Laugier and Marc Cerisuelo (eds), *Stanley Cavell, Cinéma et Philosophie* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2001), pp. 67–93.

11 Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Moi uses Cavell in her readings of Simon de Bouvoir by inquiring into the relationship between speaking for oneself and speaking for others. Despite her deep sympathy for Cavell's work she does not enter into a systematic and critical reading of the issues of gender in Cavell's own philosophy of skepticism.

12 Cynthia Freeland, 'Film Theory,' in Alison M. Jaggar and Iris M. Young (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 351–60, p. 358; Naomi Scheman, 'Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters: Framing the Sight of Women,' *Critical Inquiry*, 15:1 (1988): 62–89, p. 66ff.

13 Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women. Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991). A more positive reading of Cavell's interpretation of these movies is found in: Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). Nevertheless, as we will see, Modleski's point deserves closer examination.

Otherwise, the violence implied in the psychoanalytic imagination of self would be simply repeated.

Stephen Mulhall, however, cautions that we

> cannot dismiss his [Cavell's] picture of male and female on the grounds that [it] invokes a potentially reductive and oppressive binary opposition; we must rather show the precise points – if any – at which the complex, provisional, and open-ended elucidation of that opposition which emerges across the full range of his work is reductive or oppressive.[14]

My book aims to take up Mulhall's challenge by revealing the precise points where Cavell's symbolism of gender has oppressive consequences. To do so I will analyze Cavell's work on film and opera, which offers a complex picture of how he understands the women's role in the process of gaining, threatening, and regaining attunement and language. My discussion will show how Cavell's symbolism of gender, despite its complexity, re-establishes the very oppressive binary that he wishes to overcome. In Cavell's work, the 'feminine,' the 'creative,' the 'absent,' and the 'beyond' are all aligned, thereby leaving the woman with the task of playing both the role of the victim of male skeptical violence and the role of the savior of men and women from this very violence.

The Cavellian Feminine, Kristeva, and the Need for a New Religious Imagination

From whence, however, this problematic role of 'the woman' in Cavell's work? I will argue that underlying Cavell's uneasy symbolism of gender we find in fact a *religious* tension. While Cavell expresses in his early work that 'respectable further theologizing of the world has, I gather, ceased,' his later writings on women in film and opera present us with his longing gaze for a transcendent, a beyond, from which to imagine what it means to be human (*DK*, p. 36 fn.). The fear of exposure to a woman turns out to be the fear of exposure to a beyond we cannot control. It is not farfetched to read through a prism of gender the following remark from *The Claim of Reason*: 'the other now bears the weight of God' (*CR*, p. 470). The woman is this other.

According to Cavell, philosophy needs this exposure to the beyond in order to create new visions of humanity. As we will see, the diva in opera and film dramatically exposes humanity's need for self-creation, while at the same time stressing that such self-creation is only possible if we philosophers – like her – expose our bodies to the uncontrollable beyond. The body of the diva is thus the locus of both human autonomy and humanity's passive exposure to something beyond our control.

Bringing Cavell into dialogue with a particular women's voice, namely Julia Kristeva as a critically and attentive reader of Freud, will help to discern the entanglement of gender, religion, and philosophy. In an essay on Nietzsche, Cavell describes philosophy as a form of 'criticism of culture.' And 'one way to think of this is as the attempt, or need, to inherit, as part of the criticism of religion, the task of

14 Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell.* p. 341.

religion as a criticism of life, after the authority of religion has become questionable.'[15] It is certainly questionable whether the authority of 'religion' *tout court* has become questionable for everyone; yet reading Cavell while hearing Kristeva will disclose in Cavell's project of transforming the skeptical life vestiges of the desire for this authority and a desire for an alternate religious imagination.

Cavell describes our ordinary lives and its languages as 'vulnerable ... to skepticism, but with the understanding that skepticism wears as many guises as the devil' (*AT*, p. 2). Our ordinary lives and words are currently exposed to multiple religious imaginations. While these wear many disguises, philosophy (particularly understood as the project of overcoming skepticism) need not fear all of them as if they were the devil. The question is rather, to see *what kind of religious imagination* is tied to the skeptical vision of the human and which is needed for overcoming it. To discern this point we have to engage in an aversive reading of both Cavell's and Kristeva's symbolism of the feminine. The task is to find behind the many disguises alternate religious imaginations that enable something like Emersonian becoming. Implied in philosophy's work of bringing culture to consciousness is not only the task of 'speaking for us' but also the demand to speak in rejection of the given state of a culture: 'The idea is always of liberation from a present state, to a further or next state' (*AT*, p. 121). Thus, far from simply inheriting the authority to critique culture, philosophy has to be part of fashioning an exchange about what counts as becoming human and what as religious imagination. Without such a dialogue, philosophy's attempt at bringing our culture to consciousness is in danger of doing so without critical aversion. The philosopher might claim that he speaks *for us* but he will do so without subjectivity, thus representing a world in which neither he nor we will have a voice of our own.

From Language to Gender to Religion

To introduce us to these issues of gender and religion we have to begin with Cavell's understanding of language. Thus, the first chapter will argue with Cavell that the *absence* of a structure of language securing our agreement in language is the feature of language that invites the skeptic's fear. The surprising fact that we can so easily follow each other's projections in language is not secured by transcendental structures of language. Rather, this fact is enabled in and grounded by nothing else than our being in tune with each other. In this way, language is based upon acknowledged relationships, and a failure of language reveals a failure of relationships. In other words, in language we are exposed to each other. Thus, 'attunement' and 'exposure' will turn out to be central concepts in Cavell's reading of the skeptic's fear.

This discussion of how language functions to make the skeptical worry possible opens the field for an understanding of the vision of self and humanity that is implicated in the skeptical worry. To this end we need to understand how *this* worry can be troubling or how this worry can reflect something about humanity. A simple

15 Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on A Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 223.

refutation of the skeptic's project alone would therefore not be enough. Here is a master of language who is burdened by the skeptical question. How does the skeptic come to this point? What makes these questions natural for him? I say for *him*, because, as I will show, the skeptical worry seems to encode a particularly male vision of self and language. (I will in the following talk about the *male* philosopher or male skeptic. This will at times make for an annoying read for those attuned to the importance of gender in writing. In a way this annoyance is a calculated risk to bring to the fore the question of the gendering of modern skepticism and philosophy.)

The second chapter, therefore, will address the question of what it is in 'possessing language' that makes the skeptical worry possible. Which human fears and desires are expressed and denied in skepticism according to Cavell? Or what vision of 'humanity' is projected and recreated by the skeptic? Let me mention here two methodological elements that are pertinent to Cavell's ability to read and listen to the unsaid or the lacunae of sense in the words of the skeptic. First, Cavell wishes to extend an Austinian or ordinary language approach to dealing with the skeptic's sentences. In which context, in which situation would it or could it seem natural to ask the kind of questions the skeptic worries about? If these questions strike, for example, Putnam as if he were in the Jabberwocky's forest, Cavell wishes to understand what makes this particular plight of mind possible.[16] More importantly, understanding the skeptic implies acknowledging that his questions reveal something about what can count as 'our' modern humanity. As we will see, Cavell's Austinian approach enables us to see a context in which it seems (or in which it becomes) natural to speak outside of a context of claiming something. Second, Cavell's theory of reading implies that we as readers are read by texts. The texts we read are projecting images and visions of possible humanity, and thus force us to see ourselves within the context of these projections. Who are we supposed to be as humans in the vision of skeptic? This question can be an application of Cavell's theory of reading onto the skeptic's argument itself. And it can be asked from Cavell's own texts, what vision of the human, of male and female is imagined in his works?

Having set the background of Cavell's philosophizing, the third chapter will analyze in detail the 'gender of skepticism' using primarily Cavell's writings on film. This chapter will set the stage for an exploration of the lines that tie together 'the feminine,' 'absence,' 'the transcendent,' and 'the beyond' in Cavell's thought. And we will see how these ties entangle women to be both victims of, and saviors for, the skeptical complex.

The fourth chapter will first follow Cavell's notion of the 'beyond' and how it connects with the feminine in his work. Secondly, I will explore the psychoanalytic roots of Cavell's connection between 'absence' and 'the woman.' To phrase this exploration in Cavellian terms: 'What makes theses associations natural for Cavell?' In other words, what is the intellectual framework within which the woman becomes the stand-in for a threatening and life-giving 'beyond'? Thus, my turn to Cavell's psychoanalytic roots is meant as uncovering not biographical idiosyncrasies. Rather,

16 Hilary Putnam, 'Skepticism, Stroud and the Contextuality of Knowledge,' *Philosophical Explorations*, 4 (2001): 2–16, p. 15.

I understand Cavell as saying 'these are the connections that come natural to me, don't they come natural to you?'

To explore these connections systematically, I will bring Cavell into dialogue with Julia Kristeva. Her work will allow us to follow the Freudian heritage in Cavell while avoiding simply reiterating the problematic gender stereotypes present in the writing of the founder of psychoanalysis. Kristeva's work monumentalizes, that is, she reflects on and mirrors, the fissures and struggles of a specific modern subjectivity. Read as expository text of influential myths that modern twentieth–century Western culture tells itself about the self, Kristeva's work enables us to locate, historically and culturally, the Freudian entanglement of absence, death, salvation, the mother and the divine.

This dialogue between Kristeva and Cavell will leave us however with an unsatisfying position. We have to accept that an unavoidable violence against a specific female body – that of the mother – lies seemingly at the heart of the modern story of subject-formation. I will read this deeply troubling answer as exhibiting a structural truth implied in modern visions of subjectivity and language. In Freud's, Kristeva's, and in Cavell's stories we see a peculiarly modern negotiation of the question about the origins of humanity. I see their works as reflecting on and mirroring these negotiations. What do these texts reveal about the tensions, desires, and internal conflicts present within the modern fiction of self? And, in an Emersonian vein, we shall ask, what is repressed in them? I will argue that a specific theological desire for a religiously authenticated *existence* is implied in both the matricidal impulses analyzed by Kristeva and in the skeptic's violence against female bodies shown by Cavell. This violence reflects a trauma of absence and death lying at the beginning of the process by which we emerge as modern selves. This trauma is expressed in mythologies about the death-bearing mother. Finally, I will argue that implied in this kind of (disappointing and violent) desire for authenticated *existence* we find a need for an alternative religious imagination, namely an imagination of human *becoming*. At the same time, we need to tread carefully and ask in turn what counts as 'religion' if we leave the skeptical vision of humanity behind. A new post-skeptical imagination of the human involves therefore an alternate imagination of religious becoming and vice versa.

Chapter 2

Cavell on Language

What is it in Language that Makes the Skeptical Worry Possible?

What do Wittgenstein's Criteria Reveal about Language?

What is it in *language* that makes skepticism possible? To answer this question within a Cavellian framework we need to turn first to a somewhat technical discussion of the Wittgensteinian notion of 'criteria.' At stake here is not just the question of how Wittgenstein's texts use this concept but two related systematic inquiries: first, can reference to criteria of proper language use serve as a bulwark against skepticism? Second – and more importantly – what constitutes normativity in what we consider proper language use?[1] How to understand what counts as linguistic normativity (and how it is achieved or threatened) will turn out to be central to Cavell's vision of language and to his dealings with the skeptic.

Any inquiry of this kind must be approached with caution. We should be aware of 'philosophy's impulse to regard logic as normative for the normativity of words,' as Stephen Mulhall writes. At the same time, however, we should avoid the temptation to 'write as if the idea of linguistic normativity, in all its ordinariness, is beyond redemption.'[2] If we are to heed Mulhall's warning we need to find a middle ground between sublation and avoidance of linguistic normativity. To do so we have to take a closer look at Cavell's treatment of criteria.

Generally speaking, criteria are meant to do the job of identification (there is an x) and predication (and this x is F). If I know the criteria for something to be a goldfinch (the form of the beak, etc.) then I am able to decide whether x is or is not a goldfinch. One is tempted to point out that the criteria for the proper use of an expression brings us back to the rules that govern correct language use. From this it could be argued that this is, in fact, precisely what Wittgenstein's project amounts to: a refocusing of attention on the ordinary use of words, providing us with a perspicuous representation of how language works. The goal of this procedure is to reveal the normative structures of language and thus to refute skepticism. After all, if we know the rules of an expression we can answer the skeptic's question 'How do you know that this is a

1 The concern for linguistic normativity is at the center of Stephen Mulhall's discussion of Cavell's vision of language in his 'Stanley Cavell's Vision of the Normativity of Language: Grammar, Criteria and Rules,' in Richard Eldridge (ed.), *Stanley Cavell: Contemporary Philosophy in Focus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 79–106, p. 105.

2 *Ibid.* pp. 105, 106.

goldfinch?' We can say, 'such and such are the criteria that govern the expression "I know this is a goldfinch" and this is how these criteria are fulfilled in our cases.'

Cavell, however, claims that:

> Wittgenstein's appeal to criteria, though it takes its importance from the problem of skepticism, is not, and is not meant to be, a refutation of skepticism ... That is, it does not negate the concluding thesis of skepticism, that we do not know with certainty of the existence of the external world (or of other minds). On the contrary, Wittgenstein, as I read him, rather affirms that thesis, or rather takes it as *undeniable*, and so shifts its weight. What the thesis now means is something like: Our relation to the world as a whole, or to others in general, is not one of knowing, where knowing construes itself as being certain. So it is also true that we do not *fail* to know such things. [*CR*, p. 45]

To understand better this debate about criteria, linguistic normativity, and skepticism, let us look more closely at how Cavell describes Wittgensteinian criteria – first in distinction to criteria in ordinary language and second in distinction to Austin's use of criteria.

Wittgensteinian and everyday criteria

The first two disanalogies Cavell begins his discussion of Wittgensteinian criteria with the observation that they are both dependent and different from the criteria used in everyday circumstances (*CR*, p. 6f.). A provisional definition of criteria in everyday language would go something like this: 'Criteria are specifications a given person or group sets up on the basis of which (by means of, in terms of which) to judge (assess, settle) whether something has a particular status or value' (*CR*, p. 9).

The use of criteria in everyday situations can involve two separate issues: first, the question of which standards to apply (for example, is a smooth water-entry part of the standards that determine what constitutes a 'perfect dive'?); second, the question of whether or not a given phenomenon satisfies those standards (for example, do we think that Greg's water-entry was smooth?). The guiding myth of *judging* is, according to Cavell, to keep these two stages separate. We do not want our judges to create new standards. They should simply 'call out publicly' if certain criteria are met (*CR*, p. 13).

This latter point leads Cavell to locate a *first disanalogy* to Wittgenstein's use of 'criteria' in the *Philosophical Investigations*.[3] Here, the element of judging, that is, the application of standards, cannot be isolated as a separate stage from the element of establishing what are the criteria by which to judge a case.[4] 'Calling it

3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953) [*PI*].

4 'In no case, in which he appeals to the application of criteria is there a *separate stage* at which one might, explicitly or implicitly, appeal to the application of standards. To have criteria, in this sense, for something's being so is to know whether, in an individual case, the criteria do or do not apply. If there is doubt about the application, the case is in some way "non-standard". This means that we have no decisive criteria for it, as we haven't "for all eventualities"' (*CR*, p. 13, italics added).

out' (describing the situation according to set standards) and establishing standards (describing the values according which to judge) are in Wittgenstein's cases not separable activities. Furthermore, Wittgenstein shows that there are cases where we do not *have* established criteria.

What is at stake here? For Wittgenstein, traditional philosophical questions – such as the metaphysical question 'how can I know that this is an object' – can only arise if language is 'on holiday,' if it is not doing anything. Wittgenstein uses the image of 'running on a slippery surface.' Without connections to the ways in which we are using them, the words of the traditional philosopher have no traction, so to speak (*PI*, pp. 107, 116). Here, the philosophers are lost, they do not know anymore where their words came from and whereto they are leading (*PI*, p. 123).

This metaphysical question therefore cannot be answered by arguing that it is, in fact, possible for us to know that 'this is an object.' Rather, we need to provide orientation by tracing back the words 'know,' 'object,' etc., into the context in which they are used (*PI*, p. 116). This tracing of our words provides us with a 'perspicuous representation' of what Wittgenstein calls 'our grammar' (*PI*, p. 122).

If Wittgenstein leads us back to 'our grammar,' how can we understand its normative force? Is normativity in our judgments secured by a prior structure of criteria as rules? Alternately, are criteria best understood as appeals to an assumed pre-existing agreement in judgments and actions given in our shared forms of life? Do we agree in language because of a system of criteria – or do we use criteria as an appeal to this agreement in language?

If we follow the latter option, giving orientation to the philosophers does not necessitate leading them back to a prefigured road map. Rather, it is by giving orientation that we draw connections, associations, and thus are configuring the map of what 'we ordinarily say.' Criteria play a role in the order of justification of contested claims alone.[5] In situations of uncontested claims I unquestionably assume that the connections and association I draw and the background knowledge I presuppose are in tune with the connections and associations that you would draw and the background knowledge that you would evoke. Maps are not the territory – we use them only when we are lost. The territory of language is created by the act of speaking (and by the concomitant acts of associating, connecting, and refuting connections). But in Wittgenstein's vision, the map of language is created only by the act of retracing our steps, that is, the words that constitute it.

According to this reading of Wittgenstein, language is made possible neither by static archives of words nor by sets of implicit rules. Rather, our capacity and willingness to follow each other's words enable our having language. We can follow each other's words to the degree that – to use Cavell's expression – we are 'attuned' to each other's sense of what can be said in a given context, of how this word in this situation can be a 'natural' extension of what 'we' say in a context or of how this is an appropriate or inappropriate understanding of what you say (*PI*, p. 241). The fact

5 Cf. *PI*, p. 242, and Hilary Putnam, 'Rules, Attunements, and "Applying Words to the World". The Struggle to Understand Wittgenstein's Vision of Language,' in Chantal Mouffe and Ludwig Nagl (eds), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, (Bern and New York: Peter Lang Press, 2001), pp. 9–23, p. 10.

that we are attuned in our understanding of what can 'naturally' or 'humanly' be said or doubted reflects 'how we think and live' (*PI*, p. 325). Linguistic attunement is an instance of being attuned in a shared form of life.

Connected to this first disanalogy between ordinary and Wittgensteinian criteria, is a *second disanalogy*. When we appeal to criteria in ordinary situations, the object is 'one which in some *obvious way* requires evaluation or assessment' (*CR*, p. 14, italics added). The sorts of things for which Wittgenstein contemplates the use of criteria are not like this, however. In Wittgenstein's cases we try to determine, for example, whether someone has a toothache, expects a guest for tea, sits on a chair, or tries to follow a rule: 'Such "objects" and concepts seem quite unspecial; they are, we might say, just the concepts of the world. If *these* concepts require special criteria for their application, then any concept we use in speaking about anything at all will call for criteria. And is this true?' (*CR*, p. 14).

How to best understand acts of human judgments in language? What do the peculiarities of Wittgenstein's use of 'criteria' allow us to see regarding the question of 'how to best understand acts of human judgments in language'? What is the philosophical work that Wittgenstein's criteria are meant to do?

The first disanalogy points to the fact that more goes into judging than simply 'calling out' whether something fulfills an *already established* set of standards. Supporting Cavell's understanding of Wittgenstein, Steven Affeldt writes that we have criteria

> ... only *in* particular judgments so that (1) our purchase on our criteria lies in our grasp of the sense of those judgments and (2) that there is no full sense of what our criteria are which reaches beyond what is revealed as our criteria in those particular judgments. In this sense it is more accurate to say that criteria rest upon the intelligibility of our judgments.[6]

I agree with Affeldt's reading that it is only through our acts of judgment that our criteria come into being, and that criteria are not given prior to those acts of judgments. Let me explain this point further. It is not always perspicuous (and especially not in those cases in which Wittgenstein discusses criteria) to use Fregean notation to conceive of our judgments in language. This notation (there is an x and x is F) creates a picture in which the existence of an object is conceived of prior to its predication. We are led to the following description of Ethan's having a toothache: (1) Ethan shows φ-behavior, and (2) φ-behavior is a criterion for 'having a toothache,' hence (3) there is an x (namely Ethan showing φ-behavior) and this x is F (namely 'having a toothache').

In this description, the semantic world ('Ethan has a toothache') and the natural world of observable objects and behaviors are disjointed. Introducing criteria as means to bridge this gap is futile. A groan cannot count as criterion for pain if I am

6 Steven G. Affeldt, 'The Ground of Mutuality: Criteria, Judgment, and Intelligibility in Stephen Mulhall and Stanley Cavell,' *European Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (1998): 1–31, pp. 8–9. He is careful to flag the problem that this formulation might be read as disjoining criteria and judgments.

not 'antecedently prepared to regard the creature before me as expressing pain' as Affeldt remarks.[7] Hence, talk about 'evidence' or verifiable 'truth-conditions' is not sufficient to reconstruct our 'ability to identify or classify or discriminate different objects with and from another,' that is, our ability to know and to learn (*CR*, p. 17): 'Wittgenstein's criteria [are] necessary *before* the identification or knowledge of an object' (ibid.) It would be a similar mistake, holds Cavell, to see criteria as a third feature somehow in between 'truth conditions' and 'evidence':

> Criteria are not alternatives or additions to evidence. Without the control of criteria in applying concepts, we would not know what counts as evidence for any claim, nor for what claims evidence is needed. And that suggests ... that every surmise and each tested conviction depend [sic!] upon the same structures or background of necessities and agreements that judgments of values explicitly do. [*CR*, p. 14]

Cavell does not identify statements of facts and statements of values. I understand his claim as expressing something akin to Hilary Putnam's 'fact-value-entanglement' *avant la lettre*. The care Cavell takes to not disjoint 'judgments' from 'criteria' reflects this entanglement. A judgment like 'Ethan has a toothache' is based on a shared background of necessities and agreements. Appeals to 'criteria' are meant to point us to those evaluative agreements. If my friend asks me 'but how do you know that Ethan *has* a toothache?' my explanations would soon come to an end. All I will be able to say is something like 'but *this* is what we call "having a toothache"' – and I will wonder why she is not more compassionate:

> The demonstrative registers that we are to recollect those very general facts of nature or culture which we all, all who can talk and act together, do (must) in fact be using as criteria; facts we only need to recollect, for we cannot fail to know them in the sense of having never acquired them. If someone does not have them, that is not because his studies had been neglected, but because he is for some reason incapable of (or has been given up on as a candidate for) maturing into, or initiation into, full membership in the culture. [*CR*, p. 73]

To make this connection between criteria and our agreement in judgments clearer let us now turn to another peculiarity of Wittgensteinian criteria.

The third disanalogy The question of who authorizes criteria reveals a *third disanalogy* between ordinary criteria and Wittgensteinian criteria. For Wittgenstein, 'we' establish the authority of criteria, that is, we as representatives of humanity as such (*CR*, p. 18). Wittgenstein's bold claims about what 'we' say are to be understood in this sense. Cavell points out that this 'speaking for humanity' is not a form of generalization on the basis of what I say or of what I have heard people saying. Rather, Wittgenstein is presenting an *instance* of what we say: 'We may think of it as a sample. The introduction of the sample by the words "we say ..." is an invitation for you to see whether you have such a sample, or can accept mine as a sound one' (*CR*, p. 19).

7 *Ibid*. p. 9.

It is important to note that this invitation can fail. My interlocutor may or may not agree with my contention that 'we say' this or that. In such a situation there is no appeal to another authority beyond the community or the 'we' that was invoked by Wittgenstein. Instead, disagreement reveals that this community does not exist:

> The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I made sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me from others, from all others, from myself. ... The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason. [*CR*, p. 20]

Instead of providing the firm ground (the network of rules) upon which our community of human language users rests, Wittgensteinian criteria are invoked when we are *in search* of this ground. I am reminded here of Wittgenstein's quip in *On Certainty*, § 248: 'I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation walls are carried by the whole house.' *Only because a community of human language users exists, only because we agree to an astonishing degree with one another in judgments, is it possible to appeal to this community by using criteria.*

It is important to remember the kind of cases in which Wittgenstein talks about appeal to criteria. These are cases where my explanations came to an end. What is left for me to say is something like 'but *this* is what we call "sitting on a chair"' or '*this* is what we call "having a toothache."' If asked, 'how do you know?' I am left speechless.

Wittgensteinian and Austinian criteria

Marks and features? In relating Wittgensteinian criteria to everyday criteria, Cavell is concerned with the process of identifying something as being *something*. Addressing the contrast between Austin and Wittgenstein on criteria, Cavell reflects on the role criteria play for identifying something as *being* something. For Austin, the observation of certain marks and features is the basis for our judgments. These observational facts are the evidence for our calling a thing what we believe it to be.

To bring out the peculiar nature of Wittgensteinian vs. Austinian criteria, Cavell critiques Rogers Albritton's reading of Wittgenstein and its implicit distinction between questions of language (or convention) or questions of fact (or nature) (cf. *CR*, p. 66f.). The relevant passage of Albritton's paper reads:

> I have no intention of committing Wittgenstein to the view that the criterion of X is a logically necessary and sufficient condition of X *in the nature of things*, so to speak. Criteria are for him primarily criteria that men 'accept,' 'adopt,' 'fix' ... in connection with their use of certain *expressions*. If anything is the criterion of X and therefore a logically necessary and sufficient condition of X, it is because (in some sense of 'because') men agree in certain *conventions*.[8]

8 Rogers Albritton, 'On Wittgenstein's Use of "Criterion,"' *The Journal of Philosophy*, 56 (1959): 845–57, p. 848.

Albritton's desire to avoid a full entailment view of criteria leads him to blur the distinction between criteria and symptoms.[9] Cavell, therefore, charges Albritton with destroying Wittgenstein's notion of 'criteria.' Albritton seems to want to have it both ways: 'That a man behaves in a certain manner, under certain circumstances, cannot entail that he has a toothache' and '*Roughly*, then: it can entail that anyone who is aware that the man is behaving in this manner, under these circumstances, is *justified in saying* that the man has toothache ... [Or it] can entail that he *almost certainly* has a toothache.'[10] According to this framework something like conditions for 'warranted assertability' and 'truth conditions' are disjoined. I may be warranted in asserting that 'Ethan has a toothache,' but I cannot quite say that '"Ethan has a toothache" is true.'

If the question is just about our being justified in saying *p*, symptoms would do. For example, the point in calling something a criterion for a stable government is 'when I present the criteria in terms of which I assert this concept of a government, and if the government does meet them, then that *is* (what I mean by; what I mean in calling it) a stable government' (*CR*, p. 69). Being in doubt whether this or that government actually meets my criteria for what is stable, or what exactly I would use as criteria to assess an administration's stability is different from the situation where I am in the presence of all the criteria I need. 'There, for all the world is a man having [a toothache]' – and I am not uncertain about the authenticity of his experience, I am certain about my criteria for 'having a toothache' – in short there is an optimal case. 'My feeling here is: If *that* isn't – if he isn't having – a toothache, I don't know what a toothache is' (*ibid.*). What would it mean to start doubting that feeling in the presence of full criteria? Why should I say 'But that's what is *called* a toothache,' or 'I am most certainly justified in calling it a toothache'? Cavell points out that even beginning this quest for certainty reflects a troublesome condition on the part of those searching for certainty:

> The only thing that could conceivably have been called 'his having a toothache' – his actual horror itself – has dropped out, withdrawn beyond my reach. – Was it always beyond me? Or is my condition to be understood some other way? (What is my condition? Is it doubt? It is in any case expressed here by speechlessness). (*CR*, p. 70)

Cavell's reading opens the question of what is expressed both by the skeptical question of 'how do you know that this is a toothache?' and by the desire to answer

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9 According to the entailment view of criteria, *x* is a criteria for *F* if *x* is the logically sufficient condition for *F*. This can be both true for a criterion and a symptom. But one of the criteria of Jones having pain is that he tells us that he is in pain. But his saying so is not a logically sufficient condition for his being in pain. The statement 'Jones has a toothache' is not entailed by the statement 'Jones says he has a toothache' (*PI*, pp. 244–50).

10 Albritton, 'On Wittgenstein's Use of "Criterion,"' p. 856. Albritton is a bit more careful than Cavell's quotations on page 68 of *CR* seem to suggest. Albritton adds: 'This way of putting it may be very misleading, since what I would ordinarily be justified in saying, by the fact that a man almost certainly has a toothache, in this sense, is "He has a toothache" or even "I know he has a toothache."' (p. 856). However, Cavell's claim stands that this attempt to rescue comes to late (*CR*, p. 68).

it. Here both the skeptical question and the epistemic project of refuting this very question come under scrutiny. The skeptics and the philosophers like Albritton are in the grip of a picture in which Ethan's pain is beyond our epistemic reach; this pain is somehow buried in an inaccessible 'inside,' whereas all we seem to be able to go on in our judgments is merely outside, that is, observables such as 'pain-behavior.' *To conceptualize Wittgensteinian criteria in terms of Austinian 'marks and features' is to miss the point. Wittgenstein's criteria, in all their peculiarity, are meant to reveal the awkwardness of a picture in which the actual pain recedes beyond our reach.*

Further, Cavell describes as a 'condition' the motivation to ask questions such as 'how do you know that he has a toothache?' in the face of Ethan's pain. One needs to be in a certain frame of mind, in a position *vis-à-vis* our language and our community, in order to be motivated by such questions. Recalling the notion that Wittgensteinian criteria are meant as appeals to communal agreement we can infer that the 'condition' Cavell mentions is one of isolation from this very community. Not only has the other's pain dropped out, it seems as if the community has dropped out as well. Or I have dropped out of it. These considerations introduce the problem of how an individual speaker (actor) is related to her community. Cavell's further comparison between Wittgensteinian and Austinian criteria will draw us deeper into this problem.

Generic and specific objects A second disanalogy between Austinian and Wittgensteinian criteria is captured in Cavell's distinction between 'generic' and 'specific' objects. Austin is concerned with the question of how to identify specific objects, like 'goldfinches,' in a concrete observational situation. How can I know that *this* here is a 'goldfinch' or that *that* there is a table? Austin combats the philosopher's idea that to prove that I know *x*, I have to rule out each and every possibility that could disprove my claim. Rather, he thinks in some circumstances I have 'enough' knowledge already. The context in which the question is asked will determine both the type of evidence that can count as 'enough' as well as when 'enough' is 'enough.'[11] Austin focuses on ordinary objects, like goldfinches, where there is little or no room for alternative descriptions. Yet the objects of the epistemologist are of a 'generic' sort (cf. *CR*, p. 52). These are objects, where the problem is not one of identification but solely one of existence:

> When those objects present themselves to the epistemologist, he is not taking one as opposed to another, interested in its features as peculiar to it and nothing else. He would rather, so to speak, have an unrecognizable *something* there if he could, an anything, a that-ness. What comes to him is an island ... What is at stake for him in the object is its materiality as such, externality altogether. [*CR*, p. 53]

Is it, however, reasonable to entertain such an interest in generic objects by asking about their existence or reality outside of controlling concrete circumstances? Given

11 'Knowing it's a real goldfinch isn't in question in the ordinary case when I say I know it's a goldfinch: reasonable precautions only are taken ... [and] the precautions cannot be more than reasonable, relative to current intents and purposes.' Austin, 'Other Minds,' p. 56, quoted by Cavell, *CR*, p. 58.

an optimal epistemic situation, under what circumstances could the question 'but how do you know that this is a tomato' make sense? According to Cavell, asking this question implies that I am in a better epistemological position than you; I know more about tomatoes. But in the case of the generic objects, *nobody* is in a privileged epistemic situation. The epistemologist asks a question about *our* capacity to know, and not one about the capacity of someone in particular (cf. *CR*, p. 56).

Is it the case that the philosopher is asking unreasonable questions? After all, Austin lays out the common grammar of difference in the question of 'how do you know?' And 'to ask for "more" than *that* permits is hardly to be thought of as discourteous, etc. It constitutes not an unreasonableness of intellectual manner but a denial of human reason' (*CR*, p. 58).

We have now reached a point where we can see the force of the analogies and disanalogies between Wittgensteinian and Austinian criteria more clearly. For Austin, full knowledge of a case is expressed in justifying your choice of a name for a concrete thing on the basis of established criteria understood as observable marks and features. You call out what it is. Here '"call" is related to non-grammatical criteria (features, or marks) and specific objects (those about which the problem of knowledge is a problem of identification)' (*CR*, p. 73). You are proficient if you can name such an object correctly when you see one. Criteria relate the name to the specifics of the object.

Austin's criteria require special knowledge; one needs to know how to recognize 'a woodpecker,' for example. These criteria function like a technical handbook of, let us say, furniture styles, which can teach us how to recognize a specific chair as a Louis XVI chaise. Wittgensteinian criteria, however, deal with questions like 'what *is* a chair' (generic object) and 'what is sitting on a chair'? To call out '*this* is what we call sitting on a chair' does not relate to a specific feature but to our capacity to employ a concept at all:

> In a Wittgensteinian context, 'call' is related to grammatical criteria and generic objects. The criteria do not relate a name to an object, but, we might say, various concepts to the concept of that object. Here the test of your possession of a concept (e.g., of a chair, or a bird: of the meaning of a word; of what it is to know something) would be your ability to use the concept in conjunction with other concepts, your knowledge of which concepts are relevant to the one in question and which are not; your knowledge of how various relevant concepts, used in conjunction with the concepts of different kinds of objects, require different kinds of contexts for their competent employment. [*CR*, p. 73]

In the Austinian worldview, criteria could teach you the right information (what to look for to tell Louis XVI from Louis XIV chaises) should you be misapplying a name. In Wittgensteinian cases, what one would be lacking is not a single piece of information, but 'the possibility of acquiring knowledge *überhaupt*. You cannot be told the name of an object, because there is as yet no *object* of that kind for you to attach a forthcoming name to ... (To what does a child attach the official name <Nyuw York>? The child's world contains no cities)' (*CR*, p. 77).

The point here is that we must already have knowledge about some things in order to start the enterprise of identification. We need an idea of what color, matter,

mind, meanings are supposed to be.[12] But what does it mean to know what 'color, matter, mind, to sit,' etc., means? How could we *not* know this? Wittgenstein's criteria inquire into our capacity to employ those words. If pressed with the question 'but how do you know?,' all we can do is point. *This* is what it means to sit. *This* is a color.

Pointing, however, is not an escape from the conundrum that we need to have appropriate background knowledge to understand the 'demonstrative' gesture. As Cavell writes:

> [It] registers that we are to recollect those very general facts of nature or culture which we all, all who can talk and act together, do (must) in fact be using as criteria; facts we only need to recollect, for we cannot fail to know them in the sense of having never acquired them. If someone does not have them, that is not because his studies have been neglected, but because he is for some reason incapable of (or has been given up on as a candidate for) maturing into, or initiation into, full membership in the culture. [*CR*, p. 73]

Instead of presenting 'the demonstrative' as most basic form of fixing references, Wittgenstein's grammatical inquiry elicits how a concept like 'pointing to' is connected to a host of other concepts.[13] This type of inquiry relates therefore a given concept with those 'facts of nature or culture which we ... cannot fail to know' as members of our language community (*ibid.*).

Wittgenstein's criteria point us to these facts and to the fact that besides our concurrence in judgment, our mutual attunement in not failing to know them, we have nothing to go on. The skeptic's worries disclose this feature of our claims to knowledge. They reveal an uneasiness with the fact that what counts as being the case or what is the case, is fundamentally deeply dependent on our mutual agreements.

From Criteria to Projection

Affeldt, Mulhall, Putnam and Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's criteria

Systematicity of language and a system in language A recent discussion between Steven Affeldt, Hilary Putnam, and Stephen Mulhall can shed light on why it is so problematic for many philosophers to accept the fact that what counts as, or what *is* the case, is so deeply dependent on our mutual agreements. As Putnam remarks in his 'Rules, Attunement, and "Applying Words to the World,"' this discussion goes beyond questions of correct Wittgenstein exegesis. Rather, it reveals how Cavell's reading of Wittgensteinian criteria challenges established assumptions about the relation of language and world. More specifically, these are assumptions about what grounds our capacity to speak about things in the world and our ability to speak to one another.

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12 Cavell calls what has to be in place 'something like natural kind or a metaphysical category of objects' (*CR*, p. 77).

13 And 'pointing,' too, is part of a language-game. I have to know what relevant features are pointed to, and what pointing to is supposed to accomplish (cf. *CR*, p. 211).

The Mulhall–Affeldt–Putnam debate revolves around the question of linguistic normativity, bringing us back to the question that opened this chapter. What legislates our 'going on' in language? On what basis do we employ words in any given context, and, more importantly, how do we understand a new use of a word in a new context? How can we go *on* into unchartered linguistic territory?

According to what Putnam calls the orthodox interpretation of Wittgenstein, criteria are not only employed in the context of justification of *particular* judgments; rather, *all* of our linguistic judgments, whether they are uncontested or unconfused, are informed by criteria. Putnam ascribes this orthodox view to Mulhall who states that even in uncontested cases there are no valid 'judgments without criteria' (Mulhall, 'Givenness,' p. 39).

It is true that there are passages in Mulhall's earlier papers that seem to soften that claim. At some points, Mulhall limits his claim to 'the order of justification, not that of perception or judgment' (*ibid*., p. 35). He writes:

> The point is that if my judgment that something is a chair were to be subject to question or contestation, then I must be able to, and would, justify it by reference to certain features of the object itself, and of the ways in which it is intended to be and can be employed. [*Ibid*., p. 35]

As Putnam notes, however, the idea that criteria play a role in the order of justification alone appears only sporadically and is not expanded in Mulhall's argument.[14] Rather, Mulhall describes his position as expressing the 'simple idea that criteria are what we go on when we apply words to the world' (Mulhall, 'Givenness,' p. 36). I agree with Putnam that these passages certainly make it sound 'as if all talk about the world *employs* criteria, whether a "claim" has been "contested" or not' (*ibid*., p. 12).

What is at stake is the question of whether or not criteria are employed in *all* talk about the world or only within the context of justifying a claim? Mulhall feels that if we reduce the role of criteria only to situations of *contested* judgments we would lose precisely the capacity to see our

> everyday judgments as normative, as open to evaluation as correct or incorrect. For such talk presupposes the existence of standards of correctness, of norms; it must be possible for us to justify how we go on, and as Wittgenstein tells us 'justification consists in appealing to something independent of what is being justified' (*PI*, p. 265). It is that justification that, on my account, criteria provide.[15]

The idea is that we have to hold on to the idea that criteria provide a framework of rules that is independent 'of the particular judgment that those rules "justify."'[16] Otherwise, as Mulhall seems to suspect, criteria would be created by the very context of justification that they are supposed to adjudicate. This cannot be the case, since we cannot simply make up the rules as we go.

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14 Putnam, Hilary. 'Rules, Attunements, and "Applying Words to the World,"' p. 12.

15 Stephen Mulhall, 'The Givenness of Grammar: A Reply to Steven Affeldt,' *European Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (1998): 32–44, p. 40.

16 Hilary Putnam, 'Rules, Attunements, and "Applying Words to the World,"' p. 13.

Linguistic normativity is at the center of Mulhall's concerns. Mulhall states that he does not find it appropriate to understand all talk of linguistic normativity along the lines of impersonal algorithms: 'Philosophy's impulse to regard logic as normative for the normativity of words is emblematic of a broader human impulse to regard such normativity solely as something to which we must impersonally and inflexibly respond rather than something for which we are also individually and unforeseeably responsible.'[17]

Mulhall asks, however, whether the rejection of *this* understanding of rules as impersonal structures bars us from conceiving of linguistic normativity in terms of rules, *tout court*. Reminding us of the fact that Wittgenstein himself uses 'criteria' and 'rules' to discuss linguistic normativity, Mulhall's work consistently raises the issue of how to account for such normativity and how to relate it to our speaking together.[18]

Mulhall thinks that only a given structure of 'standards governing the applications of concepts,' allows for the very systematicity of language that impressed Cavell so much (Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell. Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, p. 80). Cavell associates with the word 'systematicity' the astonishing fact that

> language is shared, that the forms I rely upon in making sense are human forms, that they impose human limits upon me, that when I say what we 'can' and 'cannot' say I am indeed voicing necessities which others recognize, i.e., obey (consciously or not); and that our uses of language are pervasively, almost unimaginably, systematic. [*CR*, p. 29]

Mulhall is searching for the ground of that 'systematically' shared use of language. In the words of Affeldt, Mulhall seems to feel that our agreement *in* language 'must rest upon some structure *of* language.'[19] This idea motivates the general thrust of Mulhall's reading of Cavell on the role of criteria as the 'presupposition of mutual intelligibility.'[20] Criteria, says Mulhall, 'align speakers with one another' thereby *constituting* agreement and community among us (*Stanley Cavell*, p. 251, cf. p. 77).

Central for Mulhall's project of explaining our agreement in language through a structure of language is the following *double nature* of criteria. First, criteria in Mulhall's view are observable marks and features, allowing us to see whether or not we are justified in claiming that something is something. In this sense, criteria secure

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17 Mulhall, 'Stanley Cavell's Vision of Normativity or Language,' in: Eldridge (ed.), *Stanley Cavell*, 79–106, p. 105.

18 Mulhall leaves room for the interpretation that Wittgenstein's use of a mathematical example in his discussions of 'obeying a rule' is meant not to describe Wittgenstein's own vision of linguistic normativity but as 'acting out' a philosophical fantasy for therapeutic reasons (*ibid*., p. 105).

19 Affeldt, 'Ground of Mutuality,' p. 3.

20 Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 104. In Mulhall's very deep and sympathetic reading of Cavell's *Claim of Reason*, we find the same tensions that Putnam detected in Mulhall's paper. On the one hand he wishes to follow Cavell's rejection of the view that appeals to criteria are 'attempts to explain or prove that human beings are attuned in their words' (*ibid.* p. 81). On the other hand his own discussion of the function of criteria in language recreates this very view that Cavell critiques. Mulhall writes that it is agreement in criteria on which 'our conceptual structures rest' (*ibid*., p. 153).

the connection between our words and the objects or phenomena to which these words refer. Mulhall's interpretation makes Cavell's Wittgensteinian criteria very similar to Austinian criteria. Austin's understanding of criteria differs, however according to Mulhall, from Cavell's Wittgensteinian criteria in that the latter refer to *generic objects* (pains, envelopes) whereas the former refer to *specific objects* (this pain, this envelope). Again, failure to know Wittgensteinian criteria cannot be remedied by teaching special knowledge. Rather, this failure betrays a failure to be able to speak.

Secondly, criteria articulate the grammatical relations among our concepts, telling us which differentiations to make, and what to deem exceptional, noteworthy, and important. Criteria establish the network of commitments and distinctions in which our language operates. Mulhall summarizes his interpretation of Cavell as follows:

> Criteria tell us what *counts* as an instance of something. But this link between the concept of criteria and the concept of counting involves two facets of the meaning of the latter term ... On the one hand, criteria are criteria of individuation: in determining what counts *as* a table, they determine whether any given object falls under that particular concept or rather under some other – they determine what makes one thing a table, another chair ... On the other hand, criteria manifest what counts *for* human beings: by determining how human beings count one thing from another, how they conceptualize the world, criteria trace the distinctions and connections which matter to them – the distinctions which count. The structure of the concepts themselves is an expression of human interests, of which aspects of the world we deem significant enough to get a grip on.[21]

In other places, Mulhall calls this structure of concepts, a 'conceptual scheme' (*Stanley Cavell*, p. 85), or a 'grammatical framework of language' (p. 171) or the 'fulcrum upon which the whole of our experience of the world turns' (*ibid.*). This framework has to be in place 'prior to any particular empirical investigation, for in its absence we would have no idea what to look for when attempting to discover what the facts are in any particular case; in order to be able to discover whether there is a table in the next room, we must know what would have to be the case for anything to *count* as a table' (p. 152f).

Mulhall does not want this grammatical structure to be understood in terms of 'precisely defined and wholly transparent linguistic principles' (p. 6) – that is, in terms of a system of 'impersonal abstract algorithms,' to again invoke the language used earlier. Rather, our conceptual structures reflect our interests and the ways in which our 'interests and reactions to the world are in agreement. Agreement or attunement in criteria is thus a matter of our sharing routes of interests and feeling, modes of responses, a sense of similarity, significance, outrageousness, and so on – much of what Wittgenstein means to capture with the idea of forms of life' (p. 153).

Mulhall could accept, to my mind, Wittgenstein's already mentioned quip: 'I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation walls are carried by the whole house' (*On Certainty*, p. 248). For Mulhall, this remark could mean something like this: the system of rules that provides our language with normativity and which we use to adjudicate judgments about the world, is carried by our shared form of life.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

Are 'rules' part of a 'perspicuous explanation' of our going on in language? When writing *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, Mulhall was aware of Cavell's 'hostility to the idea of grammar as framework of rules.' Nevertheless, he claims to have thought that reconstructing Cavell's understanding of criteria 'in Baker & Hacker terminology' would not distort Cavell's position.[22] On the basis of the previous discussion, we can now see that in so doing, Mulhall inadvertently masks three interrelated and problematic assumptions entailed in the orthodox view. First, the idea that language is based on a framework of rules reflects the assumption that normativity and regularity can be best explained in terms of something like rules.[23] Either we follow rules, are capable of detecting violations of rules, and appeal to rules; or anything goes and there is neither regularity nor normativity. Second, since linguistic meaning is dependent on normativity and regularity, the orthodox view implies that speech is intelligible if it follows linguistic rules. To not speak according to grammatical rules would be to speak gibberish. Third, the underlying agreement in interests, etc., or our shared forms of life can only be rendered intelligible if they are thought of in terms of a framework of rules. If reconstructing our shared form of life in these terms is impossible, then nothing intelligible can be said about how we come to agree in our forms of life.

The central assumption is that only criteria as a framework of rules can explain normativity or regularity in language. It is precisely this assumption that Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein critiques. According to Cavell, the normativity of our judgments is not ensured by a prior structure of criteria. This interpretation is supported by Affeldt:

> For Cavell this normativity is simply in our talk and action. It *expresses* our agreement in judgment and in form of life. Indeed, it is the fact that we do not possess an acquired catalogue of criteria and that we have agreed to no given structure of criteria and yet are, for the most part, from moment to moment agreed in language with the specificity and systematicity, and normativity which eliciting criteria *reveals*, that so impresses Wittgenstein.[24]

The fact that we do, 'for the most part,' agree in our language and in our judgments is *revealed* or pointed to through criteria but not established by criteria.

Far from being part of a philosophical explanation for the systematicity of our language use, Cavell's discussion of criteria questions the whole enterprise of searching for such a philosophical explanation. In the words of a passage quoted by Affeldt, Cavell wishes to

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22 Mulhall, 'The Givenness of Grammar,' p. 33. One important reason for doing so is Mulhall's insistence that Cavell's rejection of 'rule-talk' in connection with criteria must be read within the context of the individual texts and authors he addresses. Cavell's rejection of Kripke's understanding of rules and criteria cannot be generalized to a rejection of any conceptualization of rules in connection with criteria. (Mulhall, 'Stanley Cavell's Vision of the Normativity of Language,' p. 102).

23 That something happens on a regular basis does not imply that it happens according to a rule. I misplace my sunglasses or my umbrellas on a regular basis but this behavior does not strike me as rule-governed.

24 Affeldt, 'Groung of Mutuality,' p. 16, italics added.

> ... question whether a philosophical explanation is needed, or wanted, for the fact of agreement in the language human beings use together, as an explanation, say, in terms of meanings or conventions or basic terms or propositions which are to provide the foundation of our agreements. [*CR*, p. 32]

I see in this passage the following distinction with regards to both the design and the function of possible philosophical explanations for our agreeing in language.

Cavell surely eschews an explanation that is designed to be an explanation in terms of meanings, conventions, or basic propositions. Through these concepts (or any combination of them), this type of explanation aims at providing a *foundation* of our linguistic agreements. Yet Cavell clearly states that for him 'nothing is deeper than the fact or the extent, of agreement itself' (*CR*, p. 32). To show that *this particular kind* of explanation is not needed, and to question why it should be wanted, are central tasks of Cavell's writings.

However, Cavell's resistance against *this* type of explanation does not preclude the possibility of finding alternative accounts for the systematicity of our language use. Indeed, he aims to search for an explanation that delineates our agreement in language by describing how this attunement is given, how it is threatened, denied, or reaffirmed. This alternative type of explanation would not lead to a secure foundation for language use, but rather to a perspicuous representation of the *Gestalt* of our agreements. It gains its explanatory force not by pointing beyond our linguistic acts, but rather by exploring how we agree or disagree in practice.

Understanding 'explanation' in this way is consistent with Wittgenstein's philosophical method of leading us back to what we do in language. The philosopher who has lost his orientation will find his way again not by developing theories about words but by looking how we use our words (cf. *PI*, §§ 123, 66).[25] Furthermore, delineating the *Gestalt* of linguistic systematicity dovetails with Mulhall's concern that philosophers do not 'write as if the idea of linguistic normativity, in all its ordinariness, is beyond redemption.'[26]

At this point it could be tempting to say, 'But is this emphasis on explanation not the same as talking about rules? Isn't the way – or aren't the ways – in which we agree in language not structured like agreements in rules?' This claim is weaker than the idea that every instance of competent language use is based on a system of rules given prior to actual linguistic performance; and this weaker claims seems more defensible than the position that criteria are conditions of assertability.[27] The weaker claim simply wishes to say that competent language use is about the ability to follow rules: disagreeing over how to use a word is like disagreeing over the appropriateness of a given rule. The regularity ('*Regelmäßigkeit*') with which we agree in linguistic

25 Such a type of explanation would, as I may add here, also be a Cavellian inquiry into the *Gestalt* of society. In the latter parts of this book I will interpret therefore Cavell's work on theater and movies as providing such an inquiry into the *Gestalt* of our agreement and of our society.

26 Mulhall, 'Stanley Cavell's Vision of the Normativity of Language,' p. 105.

27 Affeldt takes Mulhall's position to be that criteria are assertability conditions (Affeldt, 'Ground of Mutuality,' p. 3), an interpretation that Mulhall rejects (Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 36).

judgments is *best understood* or explained *in terms of* our capacity to follow rules. The notion of rules provides the best conceptual framework for thinking about the systematicity of language, even if it would be too strong to claim that there are sets of linguistic rules that make our agreeing in language possible.

Such a weaker explanation could, to my mind, accommodate Mulhall's claim that he is interested in the 'order of justification and not in the order of perception or judgment' (Mulhall, 'Givenness,' p. 35). If our judgments come under scrutiny, it makes the most sense to think about them in relation to rules or 'standards of correctness, or norms,' or in relation to criteria of competent language use (*ibid*., p. 40). Within the order of perception, however, it does not quite make sense to analyze our recognizing of something as something in terms of rules and their application. Mulhall writes that his position 'is not meant to suggest that, whenever we encounter chairs (whether familiar or exotic), we first recognize the presence of criteria for something's being a chair and then go on to call it a chair' (*ibid*., p. 35). In line with this weaker understanding of the role of criteria in the project of explaining our agreement in language, we could say that criteria both are and are not created by our inquiries into the justification of our claims. The process of justification creates them, since here it makes sense to think about our language use in terms of rules, etc.; and 'criteria' are an artifact of this way of thinking. Within this conceptual framework, 'criteria' have to be understood as guarding competent language use prior to and different from both our actual linguistic performances and our inquiries into these performances.

Rules and attunement Mulhall's weaker explanation depends, however, on the idea that normativity in our language use is best understood in terms of rules. Discussing the systematic issues involved in the controversy between Affeldt and Mulhall, Putnam addresses this point. He asks whether it is the case that going on without criteria 'construed as rules which belong to a framework of rules which is independent of the particular judgment that those rules "justify" ... is making sounds to which no "normativity" attaches, in effect mere babble.'[28]

The idea that without a framework of rules that is independent of the particular judgment they govern, our language amounts to mere babble raises the following questions: how is it possible to project an old concept into a new situation? How can we, for example, understand a new joke? Putnam uses this (jocular) example: a former Catholic philosopher who recently became an atheist speaks at a conference for Roman Catholic philosophers. He begins his paper to his colleagues (who are aware of his defection from the Christian faith) with the following words: 'I guess I am the lion being thrown to the Christians.' The fact that this joke is intelligible to us (provided that we know something about ancient Roman gladiatorial games) betrays what Cavell calls the systematicity of language. The listeners are capable of making the appropriate connections and regard this joke overwhelmingly as funny. Putnam concludes that 'there are *appropriate* and *inappropriate* ways to understand this joke (which is surely normative). But rules? Come on!'[29]

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28 Putnam, 'Rules, Attunements, and "Applying Words to the World,"' p. 13.

29 *Ibid.* pp. 19, 23.

Background knowledge, connections and no rules Our capacity to understand a word, a joke, or a story, depends on our drawing the right connections, on using appropriate *background knowledge*, and on supplying the right (or right amount of) information. An observation from Umberto Eco's *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* may illustrate this point:

> Earlier ... I cited two fictional passages in which there was a horse and a carriage. The first one, by Achille Campanile, made us laugh because the character Gedeone, asking a coachman to come and pick him up the next day, specified that he ought to bring the coach – as well – and by the way, 'Don't forget the horse!' We laughed because it seemed obvious that the horse had to come too, even if it hadn't been mentioned explicitly. We encountered another coach in *Sylvie*: during the night, it takes our narrator toward Loisy. If you read the pages where that journey is described ... you will see that the horse is never mentioned. So maybe that horse doesn't exist in *Sylvie*, since it doesn't appear in the text? Yet it does exist. While reading, you imagine it trotting through the night, imparting a bumping movement to the carriage, and it is under the physical influence of those soft bumps that the narrator, as if listening to a lullaby, begins once more to dream.[30]

As readers we have to know a great deal about the actual world, in this case information about carriages and horses in late nineteenth–century France. Furthermore, we have to be capable of supplying information that the story does not explicitly tell us; and we have to know what to fill in, and when to stop, which connections not to draw and which questions not to ask.

Background knowledge is also one of the central problems in all attempts to formalize inductions. Putnam considers the following case of conflicting inductions.[31] As far as we know, no one who has ever entered Harvard's Emerson Hall has been able to speak Inuit. This could suggest the following inductive inference: (I1) 'If x is a person who enters Emerson Hall, then x will be a person who does not speak Inuit.' According to this inference, it would be reasonable to predict the following: (P1) 'Any Eskimo who sets foot in Emerson Hall will no longer be able to speak his native language.' Obviously, only very few people would be willing to subscribe to this prediction. But why?

A Goodmanian answer would be that (P1) conflicts with the unspoken induction (I2) 'people do not lose their ability to speak a language simply by entering a building.' (I2), however, is 'better entrenched' than (I1), meaning it has a broader variety and bigger number of confirming instances. Yet as Putnam observes, 'how am I supposed to know that this law *does* have more confirming instances than the regularity that no one who enters Emerson Hall speaks Inuit? Background knowledge again?'[32] Further, it is not altogether clear that the knowledge that one does not lose one's language by entering a building, is really best understood as the outcome of an induction. Putnam conjectures, 'perhaps it is something we have an innate propensity to believe or, if

30 Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 83.

31 Hilary Putnam, 'Much Ado About Not Very Much' in *Daedalus*, 117 (1998): 269–71.

32 Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 12.

that seems unreasonable, something that we have an innate propensity to conclude on the basis of only a little experience.'[33]

Let us recall here what Cavell's describes as our 'attunement.' The *fact that* we would not consider it reasonable to place a bet based on (P1), the *fact that* we chose something like (I2) – be it gained inductively or not – over (I1), *shows* our attunement. I would not quite know what to say to someone who is genuinely worried for a poor Eskimo visitor to Emerson Hall. I would not know how to understand his worry, how to respond to it. I would not be sure whether he and I live in the same world. We go on adjudicating in cases of conflicting inductions without a framework of rules that decides for us which induction to follow. Does this mean that what we do amounts to mere babble, as the 'orthodox' position seems to imply?

Our capacity to negotiate background knowledge and inductive predictions cannot quite be presented in terms of rules. This point becomes even more apparent if we look at situations when new theories suggest that we should give up well-entrenched convictions. An example that Putnam uses is the idea of 'absolute simultaneity' in the case of Einstein's theory of special relativity. If special relativity is correct, then there are quite a few cases in which *there is not a fact* as to whether a given event *x* happened before, after or simultaneously with another different event *y*. In his 'Beyond Fact/Value Dichotomy' Putnam writes,

> W.V. Quine has pointed out that the idea that science proceeds by anything like a formal syntactic method is a myth. When theory conflicts with what is taken to be fact, we sometimes give up the theory and sometimes give up the 'fact'.[34]

In cases where theories conflict, the decision of which theory to choose and which to forgo cannot always be made on the basis of observable facts. Rather, considerations like 'simplicity' or 'conservatism' come into play. We choose the theory that is simpler or the one that allows us to preserve more of what we consider indispensable in the totality of our theoretical edifices. However, if simplicity or conservatism, data or theories 'tug in opposite directions, trade-offs must be made, *and there is no formal rule or method for making such trade-offs*.'[35] (Italics added.)

As Cavell writes in *The Claim of Reason*:

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33 *Ibid*., p. 12. Talk of 'innate propensities' could suggest that our propensity to form beliefs 'might be determined by rules that are innate in the human brain,' a suggestion that Noam Chomsky made in conversation with Putnam at one point. However, as Putnam showed using Gödel's incompleteness theorems, 'if what is rational and not-rational to believe is determined by a recursive procedure that is specified in our ideal competence description ***D***, then it could never be rational to believe that ***D*** *is* our ideal competence description' (Hilary Putnam, 'Functionalism, Cognitive Science or Science Fiction?,' in David Martel Johnson and Christina E. Ermeling (eds), *The Future of the Cognitive Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 32–44, p. 39). In short, if Chomsky is right, then we can never know that he is right. Despite their claim to clarity, references to innate conceptual abilities remain difficult to understand. Again, to think about our linguistic capacities in terms of rules and system of rules does not prove to be perspicuous.

34 Hilary Putnam, 'Beyond the Fact/Value Dichotomy,' in James Conalt (ed.), *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 135–41, p. 137.

35 Putnam, 'Beyond the Fact/Value Dichotomy,' p. 138.

> Only a master of the science can accept a revolutionary change as a natural extension of that science, and that he accepts it, or proposes it, in order to maintain touch with the idea of that science, with its internal canons of comprehensibility and comprehensiveness, as if against the vision that under altered circumstances the normal progress of explanation and exception no longer seem to him to be science. [*CR*, p. 121]

What connects these cases of understanding a joke, of conflicting inductions, of appealing to background knowledge, or of deciding between new theories and traditional convictions? In each of them we encounter a new inflection of the meaning of a word, an unforeseen context, or a new development of ideas. In short, in these cases we see that enacting the creativity and openness of language is an indispensable feature for our dealings with the world and with one another. 'Our going on' in each of these cases is comprehensible and can be deemed rational even though 'how we go on' is not based on an established system of rules.

Truth-evaluative context Our capacity to navigate this openness of our language is indispensable for language-use. Looking up the meaning of our words in a dictionary (imaginary or concrete) does not suffice to determine what Putnam calls 'the truth-evaluable content they have in particular contexts.'[36] Take the sentence 'There is a lot of coffee on the table.' Even if I know the words 'coffee,' 'table,' and 'a lot of,' and even if I know the procedures of linguistic predication, there are many possible contexts for which to evaluate the truth of this sentence. (1) 'There is a lot of coffee on the table; please help yourself to a cup.' (2) 'There is a lot of coffee on the table; please wipe it up for me.' (3) 'There is a lot of coffee on the table; please help yourself to a bag of beans, which we couldn't sell,' etc.

In order to understand and evaluate a sentence such as 'there is a lot of coffee on the table' we have to be able to pick out or imagine the right context. One might say that in the coffee-case the concrete circumstances already determine which one of the possible understandings to pick. If there *are* coffee-bags on the table I will pick (3) and if I see that there is coffee spilled on the table I will pick (2). *Everything being equal*, one might object, there is only one possible interpretation. The problem with this objection is that what counts as a relevant condition for 'everything to be equal' will itself be a question of context. Hardly anything is ever equal and we have to select those facts of the matter that we consider to be relevantly equal. Our ability to pick out the very context that a speaker wishes to address, to imagine a story (or to be intentionally misled by one) again bespeaks our mutual attunement:

> Language could not function as it does without a mutual and common agreement about *what* is being named or pointed to. And this depends on our sharing a sense of what is remarkable, or on our attention being drawn in similar directions by similar occurrences; depends upon these in as ultimate a way as it depends on our having similar capacities of sense and action. And it depends upon a sense of what claim will have point in certain contexts, and a knowledge of what the point is. [*CR*, p. 211]

36 Putnam, 'Rules, Attunements, and "Applying Words to the World",' p. 25.

Going on, and initiation

This openness and flexibility of our language use is central to Cavell's Wittgensteinian vision of language. Cavell writes:

> If what can be said in a language is not everywhere determined by rules, nor its understanding anywhere secured through universals, and if there are always new contexts to be met, new needs, new relationships, new objects, new perceptions to be recorded and shared, then perhaps it is as true of a master of a language as of his apprentice that though 'in a sense' we learn the meaning of words and what objects are, the learning is never over, and we keep finding new potencies in words and new ways in which objects are disclosed. The 'routes of initiation' are never closed. [*CR*, p. 180]

Let me highlight Cavell's use of 'everywhere' and 'anywhere' in the opening sentence of this quote. Cavell is aware that there may well be contexts, or situations, in which what we mean is determined by rules, where it may make sense to represent linguistic normativity in terms of rules. We can recall here that the issue was not whether *some* of our talk involves criteria understood as rules, but whether *all* of our language use is perspicuously understood in this way. Deciding whether a particular antique is a Louis XVI chair comes to mind as an instance where our criteria function like a rule book – or instructions for how to diagnose whether *this* specimen here *is indeed* a liver-cell ('First you have to look at the boundaries, then you will search for ...'). Somewhere, in some of the ways how we use language, rules determine what can be said, somewhere but not everywhere. Yet, nowhere can universals secure understanding of what we say or someone else says to us.

Consider, for example, my describing a bean-bag chair as 'a chair.' I can explain, if necessary, how I project the word 'chair' from one context to the one where we are now dealing with something that looks like a bean-bag and that strikes me as something like a chair. 'Look, this is how I can sit in it; this is how it supports my lower-back; *this* is how I can lounge in it; and I can even try to change a light-bulb standing on it. Well, I can *try*.' Explanations like these are all that could be known about a word; and reference to a universal would not contribute to this knowledge. Such references would not even represent what we know about beanbags and chairs.

In fact, our ordinary knowledge of deciding what things have in common or what words have in common becomes invisible if we think in terms of universals. We know that words have commonalities and that what counts as having something common is not decidable in abstract. Whether I see a commonality between the words 'I' and 'eye' will depend on, for example, whether I have read James Joyce or whether I am in a certain mood. There is no one single way of drawing connections and of seeing commonalities. Words do not have rigid limits that would confine them to only one context or one set of instances of use. Rather, what we find is 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail ... I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblance" (§ 66, 67)' (*CR*, p. 187).

To learn a language means, in this picture, to become proficient in navigating networks of similarities, of being able to follow the various and ever-changing

connections. Language-acquisition is therefore not a matter of acquiring proficiency in applying a framework of rules from which we can deduce the meaning of a word.

Let us recall what Cavell writes on criteria and how they normally insure the existence of the objects about which we are talking. Cavell concluded

> ... that *normally* the presence of criteria (the fact that we say, truly, '*that* is what we call "suppressing anger"') will insure the existence of its object (he is there feeling angry), but not inevitably (deductively?), and suggested that this meant not that normally (usually) a statement made on the basis of a criterion is true, but that it is true of the normal inhabitants of our world, of anything we recognize as part of our world. [*CR*, p. 168]

The ability to learn words and their connections is part of being initiated as a member of the group of 'normal' inhabitants of the world. For the child who learns the word 'kitty' this word may be related to furry objects, a cat, and a smiling father (the child says 'kitty' and the father smiles). The child is not (yet) making the connections and contrasts that we make in our world. 'Kittens' do not exist in her world as they do in ours (*CR*, p. 172):

> When you say 'That is a pumpkin' we can comfortably say that the child learns what the word 'pumpkin' means and what a pumpkin is. There may still be something different about the pumpkins in his world; they may, for example, have some unknown relation to pumps (the contrivance or the kind of shoe) and some intimate association with Mr. Popkin (who lives next door), since he obviously has the same name as they do. [*CR*, pp. 176–7]

Learning to draw the right connections or making the right associations involves more than acquiring the right information. Learning the word 'father' implies understanding what it means to be a father in our world and learning the word 'man' implies understanding what it means to be a man in our given world. In learning a language we do not learn labels and objects and ways of connecting both, rather we learn the 'form of life' that is attached to these words and that 'make those sounds the words they are' (*ibid.*):

> Instead, then, of saying either that we *tell* beginners what words mean, or that we *teach* them what objects are, I will say: We initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world. For that to be possible we must make ourselves exemplary and take responsibility for that assumption of authority; and the initiate must be able to follow us, in however rudimentary a way, *naturally* (look where our finger points, laugh at what we laugh at, comfort what we comfort ...); and he must *want* to follow us (care about our approval, like a smile better than a frown...). 'Teaching' here would mean something like 'showing them what we say and do', and 'accepting what they say and do as what we say and do', etc.; and this will be more than we know, or can say. [*CR*, p. 178]

Let me reconnect these remarks with Cavell's observation that given the need for new projections into new circumstances the 'routes to initiation are never closed.' A new joke, a different play of words, or a new theory, for example, is like an invitation to follow my words. More precisely these are invitations to 'accept what I say and do' as a natural continuation of that 'what we all say and do.' And not all continuations

are acceptable; some are forced and some are outrageous. You can feed a meter and feed a monkey, but you cannot force quarters into the monkey's mouth and expect to satisfy its hunger (cf. *CR*, p. 183). What we call feeding depends on what can be accepted or refused as food, and that depends on what it means to eat.

Cavell writes: 'an object or activity or event onto or into which a concept is projected, must *invite* or *allow* that projection'; and whether the projection is allowed or invited is as easy to decide as whether this or that thing can be a shoe (*CR*, p. 183). If we fail to see that *this* is a shoe we fail to see how one could wear this, walk on this, etc. In order to make our projection plausible we must explain what we are doing. The child must see, for example, how these few strokes are a house (this is the door, this is the window, and there is the chimney with smoke coming out of it). In a similar way we must be able to see how something is a shoe or anger or reference (cf. *CR*, p. 184). It is clear that these explanations will work only within the context of language. Cavell reminds us of Wittgenstein's observation that 'in giving explanations I already have to use language full blown ... this by itself shows that I can adduce only exterior facts about language' (*PI*, § 129).[37]

Mulhall could and does agree with the latter reference to our forms of life. The point of contestation however is the degree to which these forms of life are themselves codified and how they constitute the background for linguistic normativity.

The process of assessing what could count as natural projection will vary from context to context. There is no one single standard or set of standards of naturalness: 'But to know how to speak is to know what kinds of consideration are and are not pertinent to the justification and criticism of a given word's projections' (Mulhall, 'Inner Constancy, Outer Variation,' p. 11). This ability to select pertinent considerations in turn depends on a 'shared acknowledgement of the canons and procedures that control or limit what might competently be offered as a relevant ground for defence and criticism' (*ibid.*). Making reference to shared sets of canons and procedures is problematic to the degree that it seems to paint a picture of stability. The fact that the forms of our lives and the canonical structures of plausibility themselves develop as we speak remains unseen.

Free-jazz improvisation, rather than classical variation on a theme, may serve as the most apt representation of 'our going on in language.' We cannot predict on the basis of the constraints of a genre or the rules of modulation what counts as an appropriate move (in tonality, timbre, or key). Rather, appropriateness (or inappropriateness) reveals itself in the act of improvising and in the audience's reaction. Their willingness to follow and to accept an unexpected move, to appreciate the outrageous as novel, etc., will establish what can count as 'in line' with the canonical. Accordingly, both the improvisatory and its reception establish the outlines of the canonical. This relates back to Cavell's insistence that we cannot

37 When I give directions I can say 'use this road and not that one' but I cannot give you an explanation of what directions are. 'I cannot say what following a rule überhaupt, nor say how to obey a rule in a way which doesn't presuppose that you already know what it is to follow them' (*CR*, p. 184).

make the pupil follow our example. At one point the student has to go on alone.[38] Consequently, the student has to bring his own subjectivity into the process of following what 'we are doing.' In presenting a piece of language as normative or in playing a tune, on the other hand, 'we' are dependent on the subjectivity of the listener.[39]

What is remarkable about our use of language is how easily we can and do follow naturally the invitations expressed in new stories, in new jokes, etc. This speaks to the fact how much we are in tune with each other. What is worrisome (and should be, according to Cavell), is that any such invitation to follow can be refused. At times some projections that seem natural to us are utterly outrageous to others. In these situations our lack of attunement is troubling, says Cavell: 'We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations – a thin net over an abyss' (*CR*, p. 178). This feeling of terror is all the more reason to follow Mulhall's advice and to inquire more deeply into how linguistic normativity is established and threatened.

Understanding the words of the skeptic

The skeptic's context is a non-claim context At this point we can see clearer which linguistic strategies the skeptic employs in order to express his worry. The skeptic is not interested in going over a situation so that he can find the specific context that would allow us to evaluate the truth of a given statement. In the skeptic's imagination, what is at stake is not this or that particular claim to knowledge but our capacity to know anything at all. Particular agreements in judgment are not the issue but the question of how our agreement in judgments can be possible at all.

In 'Skepticism, Stroud and the Contextuality of Knowledge,' Putnam discusses the following example: imagine that Hilary Putnam is sitting alone in his office and someone telephones asking 'What are you doing now?' Putnam might answer, 'I am working.' Now, if

> the person were to ask, 'How do you know?' I would be nonplused. I am, unquestionably, in a position to *say* what I am doing: I am working on the computer. But that does not mean that I can intelligibly say that 'I know I am working on the computer,' when the question does not even arise. In Cavell's terms, 'I am working on the computer' is not a *claim*, and defending it, justifying it, etc., are demands that do not arise any more than the question 'how do you know?' arises.[40]

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38 Mulhall showed that this was central for Cavell's rejection of Kripke's interpretation of rule following. (Mulhall, 'Stanley Cavell's Vision of the Normativity of Language,' p. 101f.).

39 Something similar underlies the familiarity 'if not virtual identity, between the *logic* of aesthetic claiming (the logic appropriate to our claims, evaluative and interpretive, about works of art, and by extension, the logic of those works, their claiming) and the *logic* peculiar to ordinary language philosophy ("what we say when" and "what we means when we say it")'; J.M. Bernstein, 'Aesthetics, Modernism, Literature: Cavell's Transformations of Philosophy,' in Richard Eldridge (ed.), *Stanley Cavell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 107–42, p. 107.

40 Putnam, 'Skepticism, Stroud and the Contextuality of Knowledge,' p. 2.

A statement like 'I am working on the computer' (or 'I have five fingers') can only be considered a claim if we can conceive of a way in which Putnam might *not* have known that he is working on the computer (or why I should not know that I have five fingers) (cf. *CR*, p. 210). The point of claiming or asserting these things has to be made clear. It is part of the grammar of 'knowing *x*' that we can imagine what it would be not to know *x*. There has to be some point in saying, for example, 'I *know* that there is a green jar of pencils on the desk' (cf. *CR*, p. 215):

> We can easily imagine circumstances in which it *would* make sense to say it. (Cf. *Investigations*, §278.) It does not mean that *apart* from those circumstances it makes (clear) sense. The point is not that you sometimes cannot say (or think) what is the case, but that to say (or think) something is the case *you must say or think it*, and 'saying that' (or 'thinking that') has its conditions. The philosopher feels that he must say and think beyond these conditions; he wants to speak without the commitments speech exacts. [*CR*, p. 215]

Outside of concrete circumstances, the philosopher's words gesture to some nebulous (unclear) meaning. The words he uses have some potential to make sense. We have some inkling as to where to look for sense when we try to understand the philosopher (for example, the dictionary meaning of the string of words he uses or in Putnam's words 'what a competent speaker knows prior to encountering a particular context').[41] It is important, however, not to overlook that without context the words 'there is a green jar of pencils on the desk' mean nothing. The words cannot do the work (cannot take the responsibility) for claiming something and meaning something. Unless the philosophers don't claim something, '*they* mean nothing' and their words do not mean anything at all (*CR*, p. 210). *In order for the words to mean something, I – the speaker – have to mean something with them*.[42] Without being employed in a concrete context, or without being put to the work of meaning something by a speaker, words are not working. We can recall here Wittgenstein's metaphor that in cases where we speak outside of language games, our language is 'not working' (*PI*, § 132). Our language is 'on vacation' (*PI*, § 38).[43]

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41 *Ibid*.

42 As James Conant shows, this point is overlooked by both Michael Williams and Marie McGinn in their interpretations of Cavell's non-claim argument (James Conant, 'Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein,' *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 46 (1998): 237–50, p. 243ff.). According to Williams, the skeptic's proposition can have semantic content, but it is difficult to find a context in which we could use this semantic content. The idea is that somehow there is a store of possible meanings that only wait for their employment in the right context (Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts, Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 151f.). McGinn reads Grice's distinction between linguistic meaning and speaker meaning into Cavell's work, and introduces a distinction between a lack of meaning of a proposition and a problem in understanding a speaker (Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty. A Dissolution of Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 85f.). For the differences between Grice and Wittgenstein see: Charles Travis, 'Annals of Analysis,' *Mind*, Vol. C (April 1991): 237–64.

43 'Denn die philosophischen Probleme entstehen, wenn die Sprache feiert.' The German word 'feiern' is an allusion to 'Feiertag' (holiday as opposed to work day). When our language is on vacation, not working, and idling around then our philosophical problems arise.

An important point of Cavell's discussion of the philosopher's non-claim is a distinction between Austin's examples, where we imagine a *context* in which a claim could have been made and the traditional analytic philosopher's examples where we imagine *that* a claim had been made:

> The significance of this difference is this: If the epistemologist were not imagining a claim to have been made, his procedure would be as out of the ordinary as the ordinary language philosopher finds it to be. But, on the other hand, if he were investigating a claim of the sort the coherence of his procedure requires (or going over in imagination a context in which a concrete claim has in fact been made) then his conclusion would not have the generality it seems to have. [*CR*, p. 218]

When a philosopher invites us to imagine that we 'look at an envelope' he is not interested in a particular case where we could or could not ascertain that this *is* an envelope. For the skeptic nothing could be gained from failure of knowledge in a particular instance. Rather, the force of the example depends on a move away from any context where we would be in a position to assess a claim like 'this is an envelope.' The philosopher's envelope is a generic object. What sense, however, can the philosopher give to the words 'the back of the envelope' in the case of an unmarked generic object – outside, as it were, of a concrete context and an imagined or real location in space and time? (Cf. *CR*, p. 223.)

The philosopher can only mean what he wants to mean if, at one and the same time, he imagines and *does not* imagine a concrete context for his examples. Cavell writes that the

> ... "dilemma" the traditional investigation of knowledge is involved in may now be formulated this way: It must be the investigation of a concrete claim if its procedure is to be coherent. Likewise, it cannot be the investigation of a concrete claim if its conclusion is to be general. Without that coherence it would not have the obviousness it has seemed to have; without that generality its conclusions would not be skeptical.'[*CR*, p. 220]

But what motivates the philosopher to embark on this kind of inquiry? How can the philosopher think that he is making 'an actual claim'? (*CR*, p. 222.)

The philosopher craves totality The skeptic does not arrive at his conclusion that we always fail to know by generalizing on the basis of an imagined failure of one imagined claim. Rather, this transition to the skeptical conclusion takes on the form of a projection that is, as Cavell notes, quick and almost precipitous. The philosopher projects the use of the phrase 'to know' from a more or less specific context into one that is neither concretely defined nor definable. Cavell's observations showed that this projection is not and 'cannot be made fully natural (= projected with a clear sense)' (*CR*, p. 223). In short, the philosopher's words don't mean what they are supposed to mean.

As we have already seen, what can count as a natural projection is not settled by rules. We have to base our assessment of this question solely on 'our confirmed capacity to speak to one another' (*CR*, p. 192). We have to show how the new context invites the use of an expression or how this new use of a concept is an instance of the

old use (cf. *CR*, p. 192). In the skeptic's case, the philosopher projects the phrase 'do you see all of it' into a context where this question loses any clear meaning.[44] In this sense, the philosopher's projection is not fully natural.

> To take a statement to be competently made is to provide for it a context ('fix reality' if necessary) in which it would make good sense (*not* be 'odd') to say it. The philosopher's progress then appears to be this: first to deprive a statement of such context, then to fix reality, or construct a theory, which provides this sense another way. And the question I have constantly pushed at us is: 'Why? Why does only *his* way satisfy him?' [*CR*, p. 212]

The problem for the philosopher is that *he* thinks that his projection is natural: it seems obvious to him. Moreover, there is a moment of force; the philosopher is forced to focus on generic objects as examples (*CR*, p. 218). Earlier on in *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell had pointed out that the philosopher's question

> ... is a response to, or expression of, a real experience which takes hold of human beings. It is not 'natural' in the sense I have already found in the claims to 'reasonableness': it is not a response to questions raised in ordinary practical contexts, framed in language which any master of a language will accept as ordinary. But it is, as I might put it, a response which expresses a natural experience of a creature complicated or burdened enough to possess language at all. [*CR*, p. 140]

What kind of experience is Cavell talking about, and how is this experience connected to our having language? Reflecting on the picture that the skeptic's inquiry produces (in which his words fail to mean what he should want them to mean) can help us to further address these questions.

Isolation and sovereignty The skeptic treats his relationship with the world like a relationship of knowledge of objects, and in so doing he assumes a position outside of the word. Cavell writes that the skeptic deals with the world as if it were like a giant 'tomato' (*CR*, p. 237) or the dark side of the moon (*CR*, p. 202). To imagine my relationship with the world as one of pure knowing places me *outside* of the world.

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44 It is important to note that the philosopher's questions *cannot* be meaningful, because they are uttered in a non-claim context. In this sense they are different from what Wittgenstein calls in *On Certainty* fixed propositions (*starre Sätze*): Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty (Über Gewissheit)* G.E.M. Anscomb and G.H. von Wright (eds), trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper, 1969). These are sentences that we do not in fact subject to a procedure of verification. They are beyond doubt since to doubt them or to verify them would be without any consequence (*On Certainty*, p. 117). One of the examples for such an indubitable (and hence according to Wittgenstein) unknowable sentence is 'I was never on the moon' (p. 118). '"Ich *weiss*, daß ich nie auf dem Mond war." – Dies klingt ganz anders unter den tatsächlichen Umständen, als es klänge, wenn manche Menschen auf dem Mond gewesen wären und vielleicht mancher, ohne es selbst zu wissen. In *diesem* Falle könnte man Gründe für dieses Wissen angeben' (p. 118). In 1951 the statement 'I was never on the moon' is beyond doubt. To negate it would amount to nothing. I would not know what such a doubt would mean. In 1999 the situation has changed. We can now tell a story in which doubting this sentence could make sense. The question 'do you see all of the envelope?' in a non-claim context, however, can never be answered.

The focus on knowledge implies further that the skeptic imagines as eternally fixed both the outside standpoint from which he gazes at the world and the world itself. In the skeptic's picture, I am not allowed to walk around the proverbial envelope if asked 'but can you see the back half of it.' We cannot walk around a generic object; that is why we can never see the back half of it. We are supposed to fix our longing gaze onto the 'world' – and yet it remains elusive, like the dark side of the moon:

> All of existence is squeezed into the philosopher's tomato when he rolls it towards his overwhelming question. The experience is one I might now describe as one of looking at the world as though it were another *object*, on a par with particular envelopes, tomatoes, pieces of wax, bells, tables, etc. If this is craven [sic!], it is a craving not for generality (if that means for *generalization*) but for *totality*. It is an expression of what I mean when I said that we want to know the world as we imagine God knows it. And that will be as easy to rid us of as it is to rid us of the prideful craving to be God – I mean to *rid* us of it, not to replace it with a despair at our finitude. (I do not necessarily deny that *earth* is an object, and has objects on it. The world does not have objects on it). [*CR*, p. 236f.]

Let me flag that the task is not to 'replace' this craving for the imagined God's-eye point of view but to '*rid*' us of it. This reminds me of Wittgenstein's remark that his philosophy destroys '*Luftschlösser*,' a word that literally means 'palaces made out of air':

> Where does our investigation gets its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? ... What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards [Luftschlösser] and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand. (*PI*, p. 118)[45]

The skeptic's words are meaningless: there is no context that could help us understand and evaluate them. His philosophical position amounts to nothing. As Putnam's critique of Stroud showed, it is not the case that the ordinary word 'to know' falls short of what we should reasonably expect. Nothing is destroyed but imagined structures. This is why Anscombe's rendering of *Luftschlösser* as 'houses of cards' strikes me as somewhat unfortunate. Houses of cards are unstable playthings, and not real houses – yet they could (if big enough) provide some shelter (think of houses made of cardboard). *Luftschlösser* however are pure products of imagination – as is the shelter they can provide. Nothing is lost because nothing was there in the first place.

Yet, whence the sense of eviction, if this is the case? To answer this question let us take a closer look at how the knowing subject positions himself *vis-à-vis* the world. The philosopher's imagination expresses simultaneously a vision of penetrating potency and of isolated impotence. To think of the world as a suitable object of intellectual desire, something readily available for epistemic comprehension, envisions the knowing subject as one who is (ideally) *mastering* its object. In this *master-vision* of the epistemic subject, the epistemic ideal has to be total epistemic access, and access to totality. I have to know 'all of it' under 'all circumstances.' The epistemic ideal is not a description that is the sum of all perspectives. This ideal

45 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 48e.

is more like Bernard Williams' 'absolute conception of the world,' that is, a total description beyond any perspective which explains the possibility of all possible perspectival descriptions.

Yet, at the same time, the epistemic subject is construed as impotent *vis-à-vis* the world because the knowing subject's position is eternally fixed as one of separation. I am isolated from the world. The same distance that makes possible the vision of mastering the totality of the world engenders the fearful suspicion that the object of my intellectual desire is perpetually removed from my grasp.

The philosopher finds himself in a position of idealized sovereignty and of threatening isolation. We may recall here that Cavell described the skeptic's experience as one of being 'sealed off from the world' (*CR*, p. 144). In *this* frame of mind it appears to be natural for the skeptic to use a generic object as best example for our epistemic desires and failures (together with the right stage directions, tone of voice: I am sitting here at the fire ...).

The dialectic of isolation and idealization of sovereignty is one feature of this state of mind. Another feature is the evasion of responsibility. In the words of Cavell, we try to get the world to provide answers in a way that is

> ... independent of our responsibility for *claiming* something to be so (to get God to tell us what we must do in a way which is independent of our responsibility for choice); and we fix the world so that it can do this. We construct 'parts' of objects which have no parts; 'senses' which have no guiding function; become obsessed with how we can know 'the pain itself' in a context in which the question 'Why do you think his expression of pain gives a false picture of it' has no answer (e.g., 'You're responding more in fear of the machine than to the pain, the pain itself isn't so bad ...'); convince ourselves that what we *call* something does not tell us what it is in a context in which the question 'What would *you* call it?' or 'What else might it be?' have no answers (e.g., 'You call it peace, but it is a desert,' 'You call it sacrifice, but it is murder.'). And we take it that what we have fixed or constructed to be *discoveries* about the world, and take this fixation to reveal the human condition rather than our escape or denial of this condition through the rejection of the human conditions of knowledge and action and the substitution of fantasy. Why this happens, how this happens, how it is so much as possible for this to happen, why it leads to the conclusions it does, are further questions – questions not answered by claiming, for example, that we have 'changed the meanings of our words', 'been inattentive to the ordinary meanings,' 'misused our language.' [*CR*, p. 216]

Chapter 3

Cavell on Possessing Language
What Makes the Skeptical Worry Unavoidable?

The Skeptic's Humanity

Understanding the world of the skeptic

In the previous chapter we discussed the linguistic strategies that skeptics employ to express their worries. There, our inquiry examined how language makes these strategies possible, how these strategies fail, and how the skeptic thinks he means something when in fact his words remain meaningless for us. In light of this, we still are left with the problem of how to understand the skeptic. What does it mean to be troubled by the skeptical question?

In this chapter we will explore seven distinct claims that will help demonstrate how Cavell envisions the skeptical worry as expressing human worry. (1) There is no inner life without language. (2) There is no language without community. (3) There is no language without individual authorship and imagination. (4). There is no inner life without community. (5) There is no community without individual authorship. (6) Whether I find myself in community with another is not secured *a priori* by rules; (7) In the expression of my inner life I expose myself to a community and their acknowledgment or avoidance or rejection.

As we will also see, Cavell's project of understanding the skeptical worry as a human worry (as one that 'we' can share) sets the stage for a reflection on gender. To which degree is this 'human' worry in fact a masculine worry? Cavell's reading of King Lear and of Othello as prime examples of the skeptical worry, reveals the entanglement of the skeptical project with a violent male fear of 'being known,' and of 'being passive,' the fear, that is, of feminization. The more deeply we engage Cavell's reading of skepticism the more pressing these issues become.

I will devote the next chapter to an in-depth reading of Cavell's symbolism of gender. Here I will ask to what extent the skeptic's fear of the feminine is in fact a fetishization of woman and, by extension, of his own masculinity. In other words, the focus on 'woman' (and on gender) serves to negate a trauma in need of mourning, a trauma that is not centered on the absence of the feminine (or not centered around the terms of gender). Thus, the question of gender (the exclusion of woman, and 'the feminine') needs to be decentered so that the original trauma can be worked through. This work of 'decentering' is not meant to belittle or erase the violence done to real women through the process of symbolic rejection of 'the feminine' in the skeptical complex. Rather, as I will argue, this gendered violence is the result of a prior trauma

that needs mourning not in the idiom of gender but in the religious idioms of 'origin' and 'becoming.'

Instead of *solving* the skeptical problem, the previous chapter only deepened it. A first answer to the skeptic could be that it is not quite reasonable to assume that our 'language contain[s] a term for "knowing" in a sense in which it is an *obvious* logical truth that we have no empirical knowledge,' as Putnam writes. But are we not then left with the disturbing observation, that – pace Putnam – for the skeptic it *is* apparently reasonable to assume such a lack of knowledge?[1]

Here is the skeptic, a master of language, who is deeply troubled by something that he apparently fails to express in a way that makes sense. I cannot understand him. He is neither willful nor difficult (no more than anybody would be who feels that he is not understood in his travails). Here is a man who sincerely thinks he makes sense, when he is in fact not quite reasonable. We are left in a certain impasse; the skeptic is unable to make his point and we cannot quite follow his line of thought. As Cavell observes, 'a question about the skeptic's claim comes to the fore. If his question strikes us as insane, how do we come to take him as representatively human, no different from us – come to see that the matter is not one of accommodating ourselves merely to him (or of not)' (*CHU*, p. 86)?[2]

This brings to mind Wittgenstein's remark that

> One human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given mastery of the country's language. We do not *understand* the people ... We cannot find our feet with them.[3]

Cavell comments on this passage, observing that it might be the case that the others do not speak as I do, perhaps because, 'the most common concept is not used by us in the same way.'[4] Recall now what Cavell wrote about the child who learns the word 'pumpkin': 'There may still be something different about the pumpkins *in his world*;

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1 Hilary Putnam, 'Skepticism, Stroud and the Contextuality of Knowledge,' p. 16.

2 Stanley Cavell, 'The Argument of the Ordinary. Scenes of Instruction in Wittgenstein and Kripke,' in Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 64–100. Henceforth *CHU*.

3 (*PI*, II, p. 223) The German of this passage reads: 'Wir sagen auch von einem Menschen, er sei uns durchsichtig. Aber es ist für diese Betrachtung wichtig, daß ein Mensch für einen anderen ein völliges Rätzel sein kann. Das erfährt man, wenn man in ein fremdes Land mit gänzlich fremden Traditionen kommt; und zwar auch dann, wenn man die Sprache des Landes beherrscht. Man *versteht* die Menschen nicht. (Und nicht darum, weil man nicht weiß was sie zu sich selber sprechen.) Wir können uns nicht in sie finden.' Cavell renders the last sentence, as 'We cannot find ourselves in them' (Stanley Cavell, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy,' in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, 1998), pp. 44–72, p. 67) (henceforth *MWM*). This sentence is not quite idiomatic, however. The idiom that Cavell seemed to have in mind would have been: 'Wir können uns nicht in *ihnen wieder*finden.' Another possible reading would be 'Wir können uns nicht in sie *hinein*finden,' meaning we cannot quite empathize with them, we cannot inhabit their world.

4 Cavell, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy,' in *MWM* p. 67.

they may, for example, have some unknown relation to pumps (the contrivance or the kind of shoe) and some intimate association with Mr. Popkin (who lives next door), since he obviously has the same name as they do' (*CR*, pp. 176–7, italics added).

In order to understand the skeptic, we should come to know what it means to live in *his* world, to make the connections he makes, and to see as natural the projections that he experiences as natural. What *are* the connections the skeptic makes, and how does he make them?

Understanding the skeptic's fear As we have seen in the previous discussion about the move from criteria to projection, the skeptic is right in that criteria reveal how much our successful language-use depends on our being in attunement with each other – on my ability and willingness to recognize what you want to say, or what was on your mind as you were saying it. *The very fact that language is not secured by a system of rules (call them criteria), but is only functioning within a shared form of life is itself troubling. Coupled with the realization that in order for my words to be meaningful I have to appeal to this community, and that without my claiming my words I mean nothing these facts engender the skeptical worry. Cavell calls this the 'truth in skepticism'* (*CR*, p. 48).

For the skeptic these facts seem to prove that our language is somehow insufficient. Criteria should do more than they 'can do.' Somehow our knowledge is systematically flawed because it depends on our being in attunement or on our being and remaining in community. The skeptic, therefore, has two options: either he resigns himself to despair (what we call knowledge is no true knowledge); or he engages in philosophical attempts to relieve our linguistic dependency on one another by trading it in for a dependency on some objective system of rules.

Central for the project of understanding the skeptic's world is the fact that the skeptic does not arrive at his devastating conclusion about our failure to know by means of a generalization from one case to all cases. He is forced to this conclusion. His experience leads him to it as Cavell notes. The philosophers have characterized this as an experience of realizing that 'my sensations may not be *of* the world I take them to be of ... or that I can know only how objects appear (to us) to be, but never what objects are like in themselves' (*CR*, p. 143).

This is an experience of being shut off from the (real) world, an experience of alienation, as if I am really dreaming while awake to other people. It is *this* frame of mind, in which it becomes natural to use a generic object as an example (together with the right stage directions, tone of voice: 'I am sitting here at the fire ...'). It is in this frame of mind that the failure of all knowledge, the failure of my capacity to know in abstract, flows naturally from the *perceived* failure of my capacity to know this object in this particular case: 'The step from the conclusion about this object to the moral about knowledge as a whole is irresistible. It is no step at all. The world drops out' (*CR*, p. 144f.). For Cavell, the skeptical investigation of 'our best case of knowledge' (namely, knowing an object in plain sight) comes 'after the fact,' so as to confirm 'our worst fear for knowledge' (*CR*, p. 145). It is this 'worst fear' that we have to understand.

What kind of understanding? Cavell's reconstruction of the skeptical worry puts us in the presence of a human being in fear. Understanding the skeptic's fear demands, therefore, the labor of acknowledgment of the skeptic.

To my mind, when presented with the skeptic's worry, we are in a situation not quite dissimilar to being in the presence of someone in pain. If Anne tells me that she is in pain she expects a reaction on my part. She is looking for help, deliverance, or at least a sign of empathy. 'I know' can be an expression of such empathy. 'I know what it feels like'; 'I see your pain, and I am pained by it. I do not evade my helplessness and your suffering'; 'I recognize that you are going through something that I cannot even imagine to go through.' Likewise, if someone tells me that she has incurable cancer she won't wish for me to stop talking to her (because of my embarrassment or of an irrational fear of contamination). What is at stake in these encounters is a wish to be treated as a human being – and the acknowledgment or denial of this wish. To be treated as a human being means concretely to be spoken to (with words and gestures) and not to be abandoned.

These points allow me to see that the task in understanding the skeptic's fear is to acknowledge his being in fear in such a way that he is considered a part of a shared community. This implies the task of acknowledging his fear as a human fear. In the case of the cancer patient, I might say that her pain is 'inhuman.' But this does not deny the fact that I consider her suffering as human. I can be moved because her suffering reveals something about our humanity or because I realize that it is humanly possible to suffer like her – that is, I might be afflicted in a similar way. This is only possible if we hear the voice that expresses his fear (this particular fear) as a human voice, as not only speaking to us but also *for* us.

The skeptic's voice as human voice Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophical method, and more specifically the role his appeal to 'what *we* say' plays, will further this line of thought:

> When Wittgenstein, or at this stage any philosopher appealing to ordinary language, 'says what we say,' what he is producing is not a generalization ... but a (supposed) instance of what we say. We may think of it as a sample. The introduction of the sample by the words 'We say ...' is an invitation for you to see whether you have such a sample, or can accept mine as a sound one. [CR, p. 19]

I want to suggest that we can consider similarly the questions that the skeptic produces as samples. These questions are invitations to see whether we are troubled by experiences or questions like those that give rise to, or express, the skeptic's fear for our knowledge. We can read, for example, Descartes 'stage directions' (the setting of the scene) as invitations to see whether we can find in ourselves similar thoughts and experiences. Do I know situations where it would be natural (or unavoidable) to be troubled by questions like these: 'are these human figures I see really human beings or are they automata?', or 'isn't it someone else who is speaking through my mouth?' As Cavell writes in 'Knowing and Acknowledging,' the problem 'is to discover the specific plight of mind and circumstance within which a human being

gives voice to his condition. Skepticism may not be sanity, but it cannot be harder to make sense of than insanity, nor perhaps easier, nor perhaps less revealing.'[5]

The appeal to what is 'ordinarily said' expresses not an appeal to statistics about language use. Rather this reference appeals to how or that we as human beings are in attunement and it is an appeal to what we are troubled by and find natural to ask. Consequently, all appeals to ordinary language rest on the authority of introspection into our humanity. This introspection is the final authority to be had in philosophy. Let us consider what Cavell writes about the method of philosophy:

> Because the way you must rely upon yourself as a source of what is said when, demands that you grant full title to others as sources of that data – not out of politeness, but because the nature of the claim you make for yourself is repudiated without that acknowledgment: it is a claim that no one knows better than you whether and when a thing is said, and if this is not to be taken as a claim to expertise (a way of taking it which repudiates it) then it must be understood to mean that you know no better than others what you claim to know. With respect to the data of philosophy our positions are the same. This is scarcely a discovery of ordinary language philosophy; it is the latest confirmation of what the oracle said to Socrates. [*MWM*, pp. 239–40]

And

> Philosophers from Socrates onward have ... tried to understand themselves, and have found in that both the method and the goal of philosophizing. [*MWM,* p. 68]

Knowing what 'we' say, feel, or find outrageous, etc., leads us into an inquiry into knowledge about 'ourselves,' about what it means to be 'us,' humans. More specifically, this inquiry into our humanity leads to the question of what it means to be – as Cavell says – 'burdened enough to possess language at all' (*CR*, p. 140). As we will see, this burden of possessing language is not equally shared; it is deeply gendered.

Voices, or can the skeptic speak for us? Let me remind us here of how Wittgenstein employs different 'voices' in the *Philosophical Investigations*. The voice that appears first is the voice of temptation trying to find the essential features of language, which make language possible. This is the voice of metaphysics speaking about (false) necessities and producing nonsense. The second voice is the voice of correction aimed at educating the will and the self. This voice speaks for the ordinary language and appeals to ordinary language. These two voices, moreover, speak in different tones and colorations – sometimes full-throated or haughty, and at other times meditative or bemused. This interplay of differently colored voices, this ongoing dialogue, is in Cavell's analysis central for the style of the *Investigations*, which is the style of confessions: 'In confessing you do not explain or justify, but describe how it is with you. And confession, unlike dogma, is not to be believed but tested, and accepted or rejected. Nor is it the occasion for accusation, except of yourself, and by implication those who find themselves in you' (*MWM*, p. 71). Confession is

5 Cavell, 'Knowing and Acknowledging,' in *MWM*, pp. 238–66, p. 241.

the mode of writing, which is appropriate for exploring myself and describing my temptations, giving exhortations, and working on or showing an inner change. It is a revelatory writing-style as well as a therapeutic performance.

For Cavell it becomes important to note that both voices, that of temptation and that of correction, are essential for Wittgenstein's project. Both need each other.[6] And it is decisive that there is no third voice to adjudicate the conflict or to end the dialogue between them. The *Investigations* create a space in which both voices have their place and in which they can work out their conflict. Let me note that 'working out' does not so much imply that the conflict ends, but rather that the depth of the questions, the human stakes, are explored (cf. *CHU*, p. 83):

> The title [*Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*] covers the conflict between 'two voices' in the *Investigations* ... taken in conjunction with a perspective on these voices, a perspective from which to refuse to take either of the 'sides' of their fixated, seesaw conflict, a perspective I say does not present itself to me as a further voice.[7]

The point of this dialogue is, as Davide Sparti rightly notes, not to present two different persons but to make us realize that both of these voices are accessible for us. Both are part of who we are as human beings.[8] Cavell writes:

> [B]y now it is becoming clear that each of the voices, and silences, of the *Investigations* are the philosopher's, call him Wittgenstein, and they are meant as ours, so that the teacher's and the child's position, among others, are ours, ones I may at any time find myself in. How else would the *Investigations* form its portrait of the human self, on a par with Locke's *Essay*, Hume's *Treatise*, Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and like Plato's and Freud's visions, a self that incorporates selves? [*CHU*, p. 83]

The struggle between those voices is a 'seesaw conflict,' which displays our permanent quest to balance temptation and corrections. It is in order to display this quest for balance, and to explore the temptations both from within and in contrast to the voice of correction, that Wittgenstein gives so much room to bizarre 'phantasies' and fears (for example, 'that stones had feelings,' 'I am mistaken in thinking I could express myself,' 'that someone else is speaking through my mouth,' etc.). Sparti comments on these examples that 'surely any reader of the *Investigations* will recognize himself at least in one of those bizarre phantasies, to which Wittgenstein draws our attention, and this reader will notice, that these questions could come to our mind anytime.'[9]

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6 Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), p. 136.

7 'Stanley Cavell, Postscript: To Whom It might Concern,' in Cavell, *Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Women* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 151–96, p. 163 (henceforth *CT*).

8 Davide Sparti, 'Der Traum der Sprache. Cavell, Wittgenstein und der Skeptizismus,' *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 46 (1998): 211–36, p. 215.

9 'Ein jeder Leser der *Philosophischen Untersuchungen* wird sich zumindest in einigen jener vorübergehenden irrwitzigen Vorstellungen, auf die Wittgenstein uns aufmerken läßt, wiedererkennen, wird bemerken, daß sie uns jederzeit in den Sinn kommen können' (Sparti, 'Traum,' p. 222, translation mine).

How could they come to mind anytime? How could we accept the skeptic's claim that his worries are genuinely human worries? And how can we come to acknowledge the skeptic's humanity? In order to answer these questions, Cavell feels that we have to go beyond Wittgenstein and beyond the realm of academic philosophy:

> Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, is not, I have found, very helpful in understanding why we are, through what mechanism we become in philosophy focused, fixated on telling what is untellable not because it is a secret but because it *could not* be a *secret* – like my being human. But no work of philosophy I know is better at divining that this is what we do, that this is what philosophy has wished, that the wish is a deep aspect of our lives, something one might imagine *gives* them depth, as if otherwise our depth might be taken from us. [*CT*, p. 163]

How is it that the skeptical questions could come to mind all the time, how is it a deep aspect of our lives, and how could it be seen as giving us depth?[10] In order to address these questions, let us now turn to Cavell's work on theater and film.

Skepticism as tragedy

Skepticism and tragedy At the heart of the skeptical project lies, as we have seen at the end of the previous chapter, a realization of the dependency of our correct language use on our being attuned with each other. This is the awful truth of skepticism. The skeptic either denies this truth by erecting grand metaphysical edifices of rules; or he becomes despondent in the face of this truth by deploring that true knowledge is inaccessible to us craving to inhabit the edifices of the metaphysician (while knowing that these are just structures of air). At the beginning of *Disowning Knowledge* (*DK*), Cavell invites us to 'suppose that philosophy is pursued either according to the myth or wish that one may know everything, or else according to the myth or wish that one may know nothing – defenses against the philosophical defeat of claiming to possess some privileged access to or measure of truth' (*DK*, p. vii).

Detecting an analogous structure of denying, despairing, and craving in some of Shakespeare's comedies – notably in *Othello*, and *King Lear* – Cavell follows a number of connections between these plays and philosophical skepticism. First, there is an inverted historical connection. Cavell sees Shakespeare's plays as working in the horizon of Cartesian skepticism *avant-la-lettre* (as opposed to the less radical version of Montaigne's skepticism): 'My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes' *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare, from the time of the great tragedies in the first years of the seventeenth century, in the generation preceding that of Descartes' (*DK*, p. 3).

Whereas for Montaigne the question of living with doubt had the flavor of how to find an appropriate conduct in an uncertain world, after Descartes 'the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world. Our skepticism is a function of our now illimitable desire' (*ibid.*). In Descartes' view, God provides for the connection

10 This notion of 'depth' might capture Fleming's idea that Cavell suggests, 'that skepticism is a state of being and not simply (or most importantly) a mental failing' (Fleming, *State of Philosophy*, p. 41).

between our everyday judgments and the world. In Shakespeare's plays however, there is no stable ground to be found, particularly no ground in what we know about God (cf. *ibid.*). The plays operate within a universe that desires a foundation for our judgments, a basis that would connect these judgments with the world; yet they also operate in a universe where such a desire is not fulfilled by religion.

A second connection is one of genre. Not only are the tragedies skeptical (and Cartesian before Descartes) but also moreover skepticism is marked by tragedy (*DK*, p. 5). Cavell's skeptical reading of the tragedies brings out the theatrical and tragic qualities of skepticism:

> Tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism is itself an interpretation of; for example, Lear's 'avoidance' of Cordelia is an instance of the annihilation inherent in the skeptical problematic, that skepticism's 'doubt' is motivated not by (not even where it is expressed as) a (misguided) intellectual scrupulousness but by a (displaced) denial, by a self-consuming disappointment that seeks world-consuming revenge. [*DK*, p. 6]

This connection, then, reveals thirdly that both skepticism and tragedy flow from the same motivation of disappointment. Whereas tragedy is the projection of this disappointment into the realm of literature, skepticism is its projection into epistemology.

We can understand skepticism only if we understand more deeply the kind of disappointment that leads to world-consuming revenge. As Cavell writes, in a tentative voice, toward the end of the *Claim of Reason*, his comparison between the skeptic's relationship to the world, and Othello's relationship to Desdemona might imply

> ... that there is between human existence and the existence of the world a standing possibility of death-dealing passion, of yearning at once unappeasable and unsatisfiable, as for an impossible exclusiveness or completeness, [which] is an implication that harks back, to my mind, to my late suggestion of the possibility of falling in love with the world. [*CR*, p. 452]

I wish to take Cavell's reflection here as an entry into a philosophical self-reflection on the corporeal entanglement of knowledge and desire. Knowing and speaking as well as desiring are activities of the body – and it is the body that through a regiment of disciplines is created into the status of 'human subject.' One of the most important philosophical points of psychoanalysis is the claim that human subjectivity is not given but achieved through a process of repression of unwanted desires. The outcome is the 'subject' as a field of bodily desires and frustrations. This process of repression goes, as Lacan, Irigaray and Kristeva among others point out, hand in hand with the entry into language (into the symbolic which is subjected to the Law of the Father). The forbidding 'No!' of the Father and the symbolic 'name' of the Father are one, as the word play on *Non-du pere* and *Nomb du pere* serves to illustrate. Kristeva points out that knowledge of this bodily and desirous original nature of human subjectivity is unwanted by the force of social conformity.[11] Together with this blindness toward the bodily origins of the knowing subject comes also blindness toward the gendered

11 Julia Kristeva, *Le Génie Féminin. La Vie, la Folie, les Mots. Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette. vol. 1 Hannah Arendt* (Paris: Fayard 1999), p. 17.

nature of knowledge and epistemology. In contrast to this blindness, Cavell's reading of Shakespeare brings to the fore the skeptic's bodily desire and with it the gendered and embodied nature of the philosophical core complex of skepticism.

Othello and the desire to possess The central theme of Cavell's interpretation of Othello is the general's refusal of knowledge, a refusal motivated by fear and leading to Desdemona's murder. Once Othello realizes that he is known by Desdemona, he also realizes that he is known by her *as he is*. She knows and sees him in the same way that he knows and sees himself.

Consider how Cavell interprets Desdemona's early statement, 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind' (I, iii, 252): 'What the line ... says is that she saw his visage as he sees it, that she understands his blackness as he understands it, as the expression (or in his word, his manifestation) of his mind' (*DK*, p. 129). His self is transparent to her. She reads his body as a manifestation of his soul.

And she loves him. Othello successfully elicits love and desire from her. Desdemona knows how Othello sees himself; she knows how he is more than his carefully crafted romantic self-image of purity lets us assume (cf. *DK*, p. 130). She knows his desire and she desires his desire (cf. *DK*, p. 136). Being known in the flesh and being desired for his fleshly desire is what Desdemona offers to Othello. He is surprised by her knowledge and he fears it: 'It was the one thing he could not imagine for himself. For if she is flesh and blood then, since they are one, so is he' (*DK*, p. 136). Othello fears that this knowledge about himself, about his revealing and sexual bodily nature, will become public; or that it is already public in Iago's knowledge of him: 'He cannot forgive Desdemona for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding her captain's captain' (*ibid*.).

In what sense is Desdemona's existence, however, a question of knowledge? It is quite certain for Othello, *that* she exists, *that* she is separate from him, *that* she is flesh and blood and desire. Yet, this certainty is precisely what tortures him:

> The content of his torture *is* the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own, his own as dependent, as partial ... His professions of skepticism over her faithfulness are a cover story for a deeper conviction; a terrible doubt covering a yet more terrible certainty, an unstatable certainty. But then this is what I have throughout kept arriving at as the cause of skepticism – the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle. (To interpret 'a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack'.) [*DK*, p. 138][12]

In his desire for 'ocular proof' for her lack of faithfulness, Othello desires to end the ongoing inner debate about Desdemona's love for him:

> By the world,
> I think my wife be honest, and think she is not,
> I think that thou are just, and think though are not;
> I'll have some proof ... (III, iii, 389–92)[13]

12 The remark in parentheses is a quote from Cavell, *MWM*, p. 263.

13 As quoted by Cavell in *DK*, p. 128.

Cavell links the 'structure of his [Othello's] emotion, as he is hauled back and forth across the keel of his love,' to the 'astonishment' Descartes felt at one of his inquiries. Descartes was perturbed to realize that there is no conclusive criterion by which to distinguish my being awake from my being asleep (cf. *DK*, 128). Let me recall here the ongoing dialogue between Wittgenstein's voices. Wittgenstein, according to Cavell's reading, confesses to this astonishing inner dialogue and to its temptation. Othello, on the other hand, wishes to end it once and for all. And the means of ending it is 'ocular proof.'

Yet, ocular proof cannot end the inner battle, because what is demanded from Othello is not to gain further knowledge of Desdemona's behavior. What is demanded is, in Cavell's words, an act of acknowledgment, an acceptance of his knowledge that Desdemona is another person, existing, and separate from Othello while at the same time knowing him and connected to him.

In order to understand Cavell's point we have to gain a better grasp for what is problematic in knowing another person. Thus, let me explore why it could be difficult for Othello to know that Desdemona is separate or for us to acknowledge that we are separated from each other. This difficulty becomes clearer if we consider why and how knowing another person differs from knowing, let's say, a stone or a goldfinch. Whether this *is* a goldfinch can be decided (ultimately) by ocular proof, and there can be a genuine question about the matter. It could be something else. The question 'is this a stone?' needs an alternative to make sense. 'Is this a diamond or a piece of glass?' 'Is this a real stone or a fake stone made of rubber?' Depending on what is the alternative, we can imagine a testing device that can produce a more or less conclusive answer. We can subject the object in question to all sorts of manipulation to see what it is. But what does it mean to ask 'does Desdemona exist as separate?' What would be the alternative?

I take it that one alternative would be to treat Desdemona as someone who is either a material extension of Othello, or a figment of his imagination, or irrelevant for his life altogether. In this sense Desdemona could be like a stone to him.[14] She could be a thing that Othello can subject to all sorts of experiments, an inanimate object that does not have any claim on him. As such an object, she cannot voice independent desires and she will remain under total control of her master. He can see all of her and he can do more or less whatever he pleases with her.[15] By treating Desdemona like a stone, her body could not stand in the way of Othello's control. The stone in my hand is an extension of my hand, an extension of my body. Another alternative to acknowledging her as separate would be to treat her as a figment of Othello's imagination, that is, an extension of his inner life. He creates her according to his dreams and his expectations. Finally, Othello could know that she is separate, much in the same way that he knows that this or that pebble on his road to the harbor is not part of his body or self. As little as these pebbles matter to Othello and his life, as little does knowledge of their existence or separate existence matter to him.

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14 Cf. Cavell's observation that Othello makes Desdemona 'the thing he feels ("my heart is turned to stone" [IV, i, 178])' *DK*, p. 137.

15 A special case might be a musical instrument for which I care. I can master it only if I subject myself to getting to know its possibilities and limits.

To know that Desdemona is separate involves for Othello knowing that she matters to him. This entails knowing that she is and remains beyond his grasp, and, finally, knowing that she 'knows him back.' To know her, not as one knows a stone, but to know *her* as separate involves further to know her as somebody who knows, who has 'epistemic access' to him. This implies access that he cannot fully master himself. To know *her* as separate implies to know that he is known:

> The violence in masculine knowing, explicitly associated with jealousy, seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession, call it private property. Othello's problem, following my suggestion that his problem is over success, not failure, is that Desdemona's acceptance, or satisfaction, or reward, of his ambition strikes him as being possessed, as if he were the woman. [*DK*, p.10]

The pressure for Othello is, moreover, heightened because there is a sense that he needs to know Desdemona. Only if he knows her can he be sure of his own existence. At one and the same time, as we have seen, knowing her would involve risking his sense of self as her master. The price Othello needs to pay is to realize that he cannot know Desdemona as we know stones. And this means that, in order to know her, he has to acknowledge her existence as a separate person with her own uncontrollable desires, knowledge, and freedom. He has to acknowledge that in knowing he is exposed to her.

In which sense, however, does Othello *need* to know her? How can knowing her assure him of his own existence? Cavell is brought to the study of Othello by his reading of Cartesian skepticism as claiming that

> ... the integrity of my (human, finite) existence may depend on the fact and on the idea of another being's existence, and on the possibility of *proving* that existence, an existence conceived from my very dependence and incompleteness, hence conceived as perfect, and conceived as producing me 'in some sense in [its] own image.' [*DK*, p. 128]

Now we can follow Cavell in reading Othello's desire for Desdemona's absolute purity as a desire for his own intact self-image as a pure and enchanting hero (*DK*, p. 129):

> To say he loses Desdemona's power to confirm his image of himself is to say that he loses his old power of imagination. And this is to say he loses his grasp of his own nature; he no longer has the same voice in his history. [*DK*, p. 130]

Thus, what is at stake here is not pure existence but existence *as somebody*. The question 'who am I?' is inseparable from the quest to confirm *that* I am. The dilemma Othello faces is that through the consummation of his marriage to Desdemona, she loses her, and therefore he loses his, purity (cf. *DK*, p. 135). Thus, seeing her desire for him forces him to see his own desires: his own sexuality is mirrored in her sexual nature.

Othello imagines his murderous deed as a sacrifice, a sacrifice to 'keep his image intact,' as Cavell notes (*DK*, p. 137). Yet, the truth is that

> ... the central sacrifice of romance has already been made by them: her virginity, her intactness, her perfection, had been gladly foregone by her for him, for the sake of their union, for the seaming of it. It is the sacrifice he could not accept, for then he was not himself perfect. It must be displaced. The scar is the mark of finitude, of separateness; it must be borne whatever one's anatomical condition, or color. [*ibid.*]

Othello's violent sacrifice is part of the evasion of his sexual nature and mirrors philosophy's evasion of desire. Othello displaces his inability to allow himself to be known as a sexual being onto the inability to know and to have ocular proof. Thus, the skeptic's tormented concern about knowledge is linked to the philosopher's fear of his own sexual and corporeal nature.

Folded into this complex is however another, theological, issue. In Cavell's interpretation, Descartes' move to proving the existence of God in the third Meditation is based on the conditions for the integrity of 'my human existence.' My existence depends (1) on the fact and idea of the existence of a being, which is (2) conceived as perfect in contra-distinction to my imperfection, and (3) whose existence I can prove. Cavell writes that a 'new note of necessity is also struck, that without the presence of this idea in myself, and (hence) the presence of the fact of which it is the imprint, my own nature would necessarily not be what it is' (*DK*, p. 127).

Could it be that theological anxieties replace sexual ones – the former being more comforting because they anchor human existence not in desirous matter but in theological ideas? This would be surely a reading in line with what we have gleaned from Kristeva. Instead of accepting that the origins of human subjectivity lie in desirous materiality – and more specifically in the sexuality of my mother with the help of my father's sexuality – Descartes is worried about proving the existence of God. 'Let us admit,' Kristeva writes in *Génie Feminin* (p. 13), that '(the progress of science not withstanding) women will continue to be the mothers of humanity, that in making love with men they will create children's births (*feront nâitre des enfants*).'

The (male) fear of (his) mother's sexuality and of the unavailability of our origins becomes displaced and projected onto a fear about our origins in an *idea*. The 'trauma' of our origins in mourning and sexual juices and in our mother's *joussiance* is disavowed and replaced with the fetishizing quest for theological origins. Furthermore, the *idea* of God is found within me – and it needs to be within the reach of my epistemic powers. Thus, instead of exposing myself to the unavailability of my origins in finite sexuality and in the powers of desires which are not securely subjected to the conforming discipline of the conscious, I chose to prove my existence with the help of a Father of my imagination. In this picture, the Cartesian skeptic had to learn to familiarize himself with his desires and his sexuality, with his sexual origins and with the fact that human (male) subjectivity is grounded and bordering desirous, sexual, not fully controllable (female) materiality. To the degree that he could face this originating trauma of his origins, the skeptic would be free from theological fetishizations, free from the concomitant sacrificial violence, and he could face real sexual desires and relations with responsibility.

Let me mention already here, however, that the picture strikes me as more complex. Note that the skeptic fetishizes an *idea* of the perfect God according to his own self. This seems to be a fetishized male God. We will, however, in the course of this discussion of Cavell's work encounter another divinity. This is the figure of the diva – the sacrificial woman who is victimized by the male and who is the placeholder for the lost origins and creative sources of language. The religious issue seems to deflate into issues of femininity and gender while these issues in turn deflate into issues of divinity. Is the skeptic mistaken about the *gender* of his projection: instead of a male divinity springing out of his mind should he look for a female divinity already in his sexual body? Or is the skeptic mistaken about the direction of his origins: instead of expecting proof of existence in some form of divinity he needs to find proof of existence in exposing himself to others – and most importantly to those who love him?

The latter answer would be in line with a certain anti-theological slant in Cavell's work. Theologizing is part of the evasion of the real work of accepting responsibility and being responsive to one another; and it is part of the evasion of the realization of how what counts as human is precariously dependent on the kind of acknowledgement we give or we withhold. But as we will see, this later answer cannot break free from the picture of a female sacrificial savior. For now let us turn back to Othello and to Desdemona's alleged sacrifice.

Whose sacrifice? Through his interpretation of Othello, Cavell wishes to give human depth to the skeptical worry. He wishes to delineate the place from which the skeptic projects his anxieties for human knowledge. Yet what Cavell describes seems less like a human worry, than like a particular male worry that presents women with the role of redeemers and victims. The sacrifice, which has 'already been made by *them*' (italics added), is in fact *her* virginity. But how can it be a sacrifice made by *them*, meaning by Othello and Desdemona together? He 'sacrifices' a claim to possessing her as 'perfect' or 'clean.' From whence, however, is the idea that having intercourse with him is somehow sullying her? Whose idea is that? Othello 'sacrifices' his somewhat pained vision of sexuality. His is an inner sacrifice of fear, a letting–go of an *idée fixe*. Her sacrifice is more tangible. She is required to endure a moment of physical pain: it is her body that is sacrificed in the process.

Cavell seems mistaken in writing that the scar as the mark of finitude has to be borne by everyone 'whatever one's anatomical condition' (*DK*, p. 137). And it is not quite correct to render her bodily scar analogous to his skin-color. He scars her whereas he was marked as separate before the consummation of her marriage. And she is scarred 'for the sake of their union' as Cavell says (*ibid.*). Even in a marriage where the separateness is not abolished but allegedly 'seamed' together, the union in separation is only achieved through her scarring and through bodily pain preceding their sexual pleasure.

I wish to flag here the following problem: while, in parts of his interpretation of Othello, Cavell *acknowledges* the gendered nature of skepticism (the fact that Othello's craving is a man's craving), it seems nevertheless as if Cavell does not know how to

evaluate this gendered nature of skepticism.[16] Not only does he leave the philosophical potential of this gendering unexplored, but central passages in Cavell's work presents us with a picture of non-gendered humanity. Take for example the following:

> If such a man as Othello is rendered impotent and murderous by aroused, or by having aroused, female sexuality – or let us say, if this man is horrified by human sexuality, in himself and others – then no human being is free of this possibility. [*DK*, p. 137]

Evidently it is a non sequitur to claim that a male fear of human sexuality would lead to the consequence that no human being is free of this (murderous) fear. This consequence only follows if Cavell understands all human sexuality in fact as male sexuality. And this is not the case – or so it seems. One way to read this passage is to claim that we live in a situation where 'no human being, neither woman nor man, is free from the effects of the consequences of this particularly male fear of sexuality.' Men are not free from it because they are, and are made to be, bearers of this fear, and women because they are supposed to be victims of it.

Lear and shame The theme of the male fear to be known by a woman as tragic interpretation of the skeptical worry reoccurs in a different form in Cavell's reading of *King Lear*. What Lear wishes to elicit from his daughters in the opening scene is not quite love, but 'exactly what a bribe can buy: (1) false love and (2) a public expression of love. That is, he wants something he does not have to return *in kind*, something a division of his property fully pays for. And he wants to *look* like a loved man – for the sake of the subjects, as it were' (*DK*, p. 62). Cordelia's refusing to answer amounts (and leads to) a refusal to take part in this exchange. Cavell reads her answer or failure to answer as the reaction of an outraged and confused daughter whose father wishes to elicit not love but pretend-love for pay: 'Lear is torturing her, claiming her devotion, which she wants to give, but forcing her to help him betray (or not to betray) it, to falsify it publicly' (*DK*, p. 63). Lear claims something that does not, in turn, put a claim on him. Cordelia, on the other hand, feels claimed in her capacity to love. In her misunderstanding of Lear's claim she reveals something deep about Lear's intention. She senses the bribery and the king's need for it: 'his terror of being loved, of needing love' (*ibid*). Lear rejects Cordelia's love because the king feels known in this love, seen as he is. Lear desperately avoids being seen until the end.

The theme of seeing, being seen, and recognizing forms the core of Cavell's interpretation of the play, and he comments on it as follows:

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16 Cavell addresses issues of gender in his introduction to *Disowning Knowledge* (cf. for example, pp. 16, 17), in his works on film, and in replies to feminist critiques. I will return to his remarks later in detail. Let us consider here only the following quotation: 'The suggestion of a masculine/feminine contest over the nature of knowing, over, say, the economy as between activity and passivity in knowing, is not to be missed here, however difficult it will be to develop it usefully' (p. 9) and he notes 'that skepticism is a male business; and accordingly that the passion for knowledge as such, so far as it is motivated in skepticism ... is inflected by gender difference, that the economy of knowing is different for men than for women. (Is this news?)' (p. 16).

> If the failure to recognize others is a failure to let others recognize you, a fear of what is revealed to them, an avoidance of their eyes, then it is exactly shame which is the cause of his withholding recognition ... For shame is the specific discomfort produced by the sense of being looked at; the avoidance of the sight of others is the reflex it produces. Guilt is different; there the reflex is to avoid discovery ... Under shame, what must be covered up is not your deed, but yourself. It is a more primitive emotion than guilt, as inescapable as the possession of a body, the first object of shame. [*DK*, p. 49]

His discomfort in and aversion of being seen produce for Lear the need for a public life and for relationships created by conventions. Cordelia's sisters fulfill his need by dissembling love. They do what is expected and they use the conventional tropes of publicly declared love: 'Convention perfectly suits these ladies' (*DK*, p. 65). Here, Cavell understands both convention and the public as opposed to the private. *King Lear* is a reflection on a world where 'the inner and the outer worlds have become totally disconnected' (*DK*, p. 67).

The problem for Cordelia is that 'there is no convention for doing' what she understood herself to be asked to do. There is no convention for expressing herself in a world where the sphere of the self and the sphere of the public are divided.[17] Words fail Cordelia because the words in her world are governed solely by conventions that are governing acts of hiding the self. Cordelia refuse to hide behind grammar and she is imprisoned by it.[18]

Knowing another or knowing an object Othello's fear of, and Lear's desire for, privacy are two tragic interpretations for the state of mind in which the skeptic's fear for knowledge can arise. For the former, privacy was feared as an obstacle for possessing what is on a woman's mind, whereas for the latter privacy was sought as the refuge in which to hide from the demands of a woman's love. From both interpretations we can surmise however that this *fear for knowledge is a fear of exposure. It is a fear that I might be known or that I cannot hide what I know.*

How then are these fears connected to philosophy or to the philosophical problem of skepticism? Cavell notes that a philosopher might be wary of his statement that 'what philosophy knows as doubt, Othello's violence allegorizes (or recognizes) as some form of jealousy' (*DK*, p. 7). This projection of a philosophical question into tragedies of desire might make the issue of skepticism lose its proper cognitive status by making it too 'animate' (*ibid.*).

It is, however, precisely this animate nature that is illuminating for Cavell. Questions of doubt and belief originate as response to claims of others. I believe

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17 Hence Cavell's interpretation of the end of the drama: Lear's happy dream at the end is that he can finally love Cordelia, *because* they are hidden in prison: 'He has come to accept his love, not by making room in the world for it, but by denying its relevance to the world' (*DK*, p. 69). Here, Lear ratifies his wish for looking without being seen, for intimacy that requires no reciprocity with real human beings.

18 'Grammar cannot, or ought not, of itself dictate what you mean, what is up to you to say,' Stanley Cavell, 'The Politics of Interpretation (Politics as Opposed to What?),' in Cavell, *Themes Out of School. Effects and Causes* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1984), pp. 27–59, p. 45.

your claim that there is another chair in the living room and I go there to fetch it. Or I doubt it and look for a chair in the study. Yet, the philosopher is introducing believe- or doubt-language in a situation where there is *here*, for all to see, a table before our very eyes. The philosopher's doubt is not addressed to anybody – except perhaps to himself (*ibid.*):

> He is not speaking to someone whose position is inferior to his with respect to the table, so he is not telling anyone anything; nor is his position with respect to the table inferior to anyone else's, so he cannot be denied, from outside as it were. It is the position that reveals us humans to be in the same human boat of sensuous endowment, fated to the five senses, the position from which alone the skeptic's doubt demands to be answered. It is (therefore) equally alone the position from which the skeptic's radical question demands to be raised, in which *the best* case of knowledge shows itself to be vulnerable to suspicion. [*Ibid*]

Our claims to knowledge are vulnerable to precisely the skeptic's move to use the concept of belief outside of its language game. Language allows such a projection as we have seen. As a consequence of this projection (and of expressing our 'immediate or absolute relation to the world' in terms of belief and doubt) no *human* other possibly can confirm or disconfirm this relation. The world is turned into an object among other objects and it is expected by the skeptic to answer to his questions by disclosing itself totally.

In this way the world as object is turned into 'a speaker, lodging its claims on us.' The world is both inanimate (like a 'giant tomato' with nothing left but its visual front aspect) and somehow animate (like a speaker forced to give answers in the skeptic's interrogation). Cavell sees this desire for answers operating in the extraordinary care with which philosophers from Descartes to Moore describe their objects: 'It is not just careful description, or practical investigation, under way here. The philosopher is as it were looking for a *response* from the object, perhaps a shining' (*DK*, p. 8). The philosopher's demands from the thus objectified world comes only to the forefront by 'taking tragedy as the display of skepticism, and skepticism with respect to other minds as allegorical of skepticism with respect to material objects' (*ibid.*).

In this allegorical picture of skepticism the world is to the skeptic like Desdemona is to Othello or Cordelia to Lear. Further, the skeptic is to the world like another Othello and Lear, driven by the desire for either possessive intimacy or by the fear of mutual connectedness. This allegory is central for Cavell's suggestion that the allegory of marriage provides a therapeutic picture to express how to learn with the fears at the root of the skeptical worry. I will discuss Cavell's use of marriage in the next chapter. I wish here first to explore more deeply the relationship between 'other mind' and 'material object' skepticism. This will clarify further how a failure to know another (as a male wants to know another human being) can be revelatory about humans as beings as complex as to be burdened by language. What is it in *having* language that motivates or enables skepticism; and what does skepticism reveal about what it means to be a 'being in language'?

An important difference between material object and other mind skepticism has to do with the role of the *best case*. In the case of material object skepticism the philosopher moves from the failure of the best case – that is the failure of a claim 'to know that *x*, because I see (feel, hear, smell) that *x*' – to a failure to know anything at

all. The appeal to the best case is central for the skeptic's claim to gain force, for it to seem reasonable or relevant. But is there a best case for knowing another person, or another mind?

Othello makes Desdemona's faithfulness such a best case. He decides to be certain about *this*. But is this reasonable? Is there a situation where we can say 'I surely know *this*' ('If I know anything, I surely know that *this* is an envelope'), and where the failure of *this* claim seemingly amounts to a failure to know anything at all. How can I know another mind and how can I make myself known to another? These questions lead us to a discussion of what came to be known as Wittgenstein's 'private language argument,' and to the problem of speaking for myself and speaking before and for each other.[19]

Speaking: Privacy and Public

The 'private' 'language' 'argument'

What are we supposed to imagine? Central for his discussion of §§ 243–71 in Wittgenstein's *Investigations* – passages which came to be known as 'the private language argument' – is again Cavell's attention to the tone of voice in the discussion about privacy and language. Cavell characterizes as 'largely in half-voice' (*CR*, p. 345) the tone of sections 243 (where Wittgenstein starts the most sustained reflection on the possibility of a private language) and 258 (where he continues with and exemplifies this idea). This half-voice expresses Wittgenstein's desire to give voice to a fantasy, to hit the right note, as it were, the key that 'releases the fantasy expressed in the denial that language is something essentially shared. The tone of the sections dealing explicitly with the idea of a private language are peculiarly colored by the tone of someone allowing a fantasy to be voiced' (*CR*, p. 344).

This attention to the tone of voice is important because what is said in these paragraphs about language and about privacy has been said more clearly by Wittgenstein in other passages (*CR*, p. 342). *How* Wittgenstein speaks here in §§ 243ff. is more important than *what* he says.

What did he already say elsewhere about privacy and language? The key teaching is the insight that my references to my states of consciousness are precisely my *expressions* of these states of consciousness. There is no gap between my pain-behavior and my having pain, between your recognizing my pain-behavior and your recognizing my being in pain.

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19 Paragraphs 243–271 in the *Philosophical Investigations* are dealing with the problem of a private language. Epistemological interpretations of this problem usually focus on §§ 243–70 whereas interpretations that connect this problem with Wittgenstein's reflections on rule-following usually look at §§ 198–202. The epistemological interpretation sees a private language as a language that uses words that refer to objects that are only accessible to the individual person. The interpretation that connects the problem of a private language with reflections on rule following assumes that the individual is the sole judge of the right or wrong applications of the linguistic rules (cf. Sparti, 'Traum,' p. 230f).

In the passages discussed as private language argument, Wittgenstein asks us to see whether we *can imagine* a language of the following kind. Someone uses this language to record (write down or voice) his inner experiences (feelings, moods, pains, etc.) in such a way that only he, the record-keeper, would be able to understand these records. This exercise asks us to consider what we have to imagine for this fantasy to make sense. And it provokes the realization that we *cannot* imagine this. There is nothing to be imagined of this sort, or if we succeed in imagining this, it turns out that we are 'imagining something other than we think' (*CR*, p. 344).

What Wittgenstein invites us to imagine is not someone speaking in a code. A code can be revealed and communicated to others or others can break it. Nor does he wish to address short-hand devices to record experiences, which people use in diaries. What he wishes us to imagine is expressed in § 258:

> I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign 'S', and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. — I will remark first that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated.

What distinguishes this example from other forms of diary entries in which people use variations of ordinary signs to mark their experiences, etc.? The difference has to do with the demand that 'no one else can understand the sign "S".' 'S' should be used in such a way that no one else could use it.

Let us assume that in my spiritual diary I note *Consolation* every time I experience a certain form of consolation in my prayer. In order for this mark to make sense to me it has to be embedded in a web of grammatical relations. I have to know what 'consolation' means from other occasions, perhaps from mystical literature or from pious conversations. It is the fact that the entire web of language is in place that makes it possible for me to use 'consolation' as something like a general terminus in my diary.

If we were to treat 'consolation' as a singular terminus or like a proper name it could still be associated with a host of possible connections:

> If in scanning my diary you notice the reoccurrence of a name, say 'Sal Michael,' you might imagine various possibilities, e.g., that I had appointments with this person; that I kept reminding myself to make an appointment with him (or her); that I from time to time thought of this person (or is it a fiction, a character from a story I am writing, or my imaginary friend?) For no discernible reasons; that I habitually doodled his name; that I invented the name for some specific reason best known to myself. [*CR*, p. 346]

Cavell goes on to comment: 'The entry "S" (or "*") was not to be open to these various possibilities. It was simply and solely to be inscribed by me on just those occasions on which something happened to me' (*ibid*). The 'S' is not definable through its connections and associations. It brings to the reader only its pure presence.[20] The

20 In Peircean terms one could be tempted to say at this stage that 'S' is pure secondness. The difference, however, is that a sign of this category is causally connected to its object. So what Wittgenstein wishes us to imagine is a sign in its secondness which is connected to its object according to the category of thirdness, or firstness. This 'category glitch' might alert us to a problem in what we are supposed to imagine.

fact that I record it if I am experiencing some feeling is all that there is to it: this invariant use is all the meaning it has, and its connection to my feeling is the only connection it has.

Of what kind, however, is this connection? Wittgenstein discusses further the idea that the Sign 'S' and the feeling are connected via an ostensive (private) definition. For this to work he needs to 'impress upon himself the connection between the sign and the sensation upon which he is to focus his attention' (*CR*, p. 347). Wittgenstein goes on to comment in § 258:

> But 'I impress it on myself' can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right.'

Suddenly, I seem to be blocked off from recording my private sensations in my diary (cf., §§ 258, 270).

What has happened? Wittgenstein's invitation probes the picture that tries to adopt a form of behaviorism for our inner life. According to such a model, the observation 'x shows φ-behavior,' leads to the conclusion 'x has pain.' Here, the behavior noted in the observation is treated as the basis for my successfully ascribing 'pain' to x. In the case of my recording 'S' for every time when I experience the feeling E, the problem is twofold. First, the relationship between the observable 'behavior' ('E-behavior') and my ascribing to myself 'experience E' is not stable as Wittgenstein's comment in § 258 indicated. Second, this picture is based on a gap between my feeling or experience and my describing what I am feeling. Since the connection between the feeling and the description is not stable or not predictable, the question arises whether or not I am actually capable of referring to my own inner life.[21] I become an observer of myself incapable of ascertaining the truth of my observations.

Expressiveness The stumbling stone in each of Wittgenstein's attempts to continue imagining the fantasy of a 'private language' is the following: in order to go on with it 'the idea or fact, of the *expressiveness* of voicing or writing down my experiences has to be overcome' (*CR*, p. 348). The need to impress a connection between sign and feeling only arises because a split has been introduced between outward sign or behavior and inward feeling.

If we, however, were to give room to the idea or fact that 'I am in pain' is expressing pain, is itself part and parcel of being in pain, is part of what it means to be in pain, then this split would disappear. Then the whole scenario of 'noting something in order to mark a sensation' also becomes strange. If 'noting "S"' is the

21 'Notice that Wittgenstein's claim that "here we can't talk about 'right'" reaches back only three or four sentences, just to the ideas of "impressing the connection on myself", that is, getting the sign and the sensation stamped upon one another, so that, so to speak, their faces can be seen to match quite independently of any decision of mine ... If there were no need for the idea of "impressing" the connection, then the objection about nothing or everything counting as "right" would have no force' (*CR*, p. 348).

only expression of the sensation S then the question is why am I noting S? To whom am I giving note of the occurrence of S?

I could note it for my own purposes (to realize that my writing goes better every time I am having this sensation): 'The sign in question just is one for which there is no reason to think you *have* a use (as you have no use for my name tapes, or no use for a mezuzah)' (*ibid.*). But you could have a use, and if you were to decide to keep a diary such as mine you could use the sign (or any other) in the same manner. S could be public or publicized. In any event, there is no need for me to inform myself of the connection between sign and sensation: 'What could be clearer? The connection is as clear as the sensation itself' (*CR*, p. 349).

So the fantasy of a private language presents us with the following choice: either I deny the expressiveness of language or I accept it. If I deny the expressiveness I cannot be sure that my signs do actually refer to my inner life. I cannot communicate with myself. If I do not deny the expressiveness of language my signs or my behavior is expressive of my inner life and (like a code) open for public understanding.

In the scenario of denial, my words and my signs are under the suspicion of just being 'doodles:' they may denote nothing.[22] The reckoning device that is supposed to observe my inner states and to produce a sign noting those states might run empty:

> Could anything and everything a person does be doodling? Is this a fear which the fantasy of a private language is meant to conceal? An anxiety that our expressions might at any time signify nothing? Or too much? (Not that doodles themselves may not be significant – that others, that oneself, may not learn something from them.) [*CR*, p. 351]

On the other hand, if we accept the expressiveness of language, I have to accept the fact that my words and my behavior reveal in principle my inner life for all to see. *There is no inaccessible sanctuary of privacy for my inner life. There is the standing possibility that I might give myself away or that my words give me away.*

What is important according to this interpretation of the so-called private language argument is not so much the fact that we cannot consistently imagine a private language. Rather it is *important to note what the fantasy of a private language wishes to escape or overcome. And this is not so much the public nature of language per se, but more precisely the expressive nature of language, and the fact that this expressiveness opens us to one another.*

The fantasy of the private language is a fantasy in which we can escape or embrace the feared or desired 'inexpressiveness ... in which I am not merely unknown, but

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22 Cf. Cavell's interpretation of § 260 where an interlocutor remarks: '"Well, I *believe* that this is the sensation S again." Wittgenstein turns upon him; he is supercilious: "Perhaps you *believe* that you believe it! Then did the man who made the entry in the calendar make a note of *nothing whatsoever?*" That is: Why are you so faint-hearted about your sensation – if, that is, you really have done the thing of noting it in your diary? If you *believe* that the "S" notes the sensation, then you may equally believe that it does not. Then what is that stupid insignificant mark doing just sitting in your diary? To suggest that someone may have "made a note of nothing whatsoever" is to suggest that someone may have *done* nothing whatever. Anyway, if he has made a note of nothing, he has certainly not made a note. And what else could doing *that* – making the dumb mark – be doing? You might say he was doodling' (*CR*, p. 350).

in which I am powerless to make myself known; or one in which what I express is beyond my control' (*ibid.*). The need for a theoretical explanation of expressiveness or the need to bridge the gap between my words and my inner life only arises for those who are or can be disturbed by such a fantasy.

The moral of the fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness for self-knowledge The fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness, of being without language if it comes to my inner life, would solve a host of what Cavell calls 'metaphysical problems' (*CR*, p. 351). Another understanding would be that such a fantasy would absolve us from the burden of those problems. I would not be responsible for making myself known to others, nor would I be responsible for making myself known to myself.

Self-knowledge is not an issue in this fantasy picture. Either it is impossible or somehow 'the fact that others cannot know my (inner) life means that I cannot fail to' (*ibid.*). Let us recall that one premise of the private language fantasy is that it is a language that is only understandable to me. In connection with the image that I note my inner life with a process akin to a pattern-recognition device, the illusion emerges that I have not only privileged access to myself but rather that I have effortless access to myself. It is this 'internal inner-life-recognition-device' that does the noting for me; or I have some form of privileged access, let us say 'intuition,' about my own mind. In both cases I can pass over the fact of expressiveness:

> The wish underlying this fantasy covers a wish that underlies skepticism, a wish for the connection between my claims of knowledge and the objects upon which the claims are to fall to occur without my intervention, apart from my agreements. As the wish stands it is unappeasable. In the case of my knowing myself, such self-defeat would be doubly exquisite: I must disappear in order that the search for myself be successful. [*CR*, p. 352]

Disappointed by our expressions Whence the desire to gloss over or deny the expressive nature of language and the wish to get our words closer to our minds by somehow short-circuiting a sensation's expression? The reason for this is, as Cavell notes, 'that our working knowledge of one another's (inner) lives can reach no further than our (outward) expressions, and *we have cause to be disappointed in these expressions*' (*CR*, p. 341, italics added).

If faced with another and her expressions we need to use our imagination, that is, our capacity to make connections, to see or realize possibilities, and to envision different situations. In order to see her expressions in a certain way, to understand her smile as inviting or as forced, I have to draw a connection, give significance, and make her behavior real for myself. A major source for our disappointment with our expressions is precisely the fact that they have to and can be read like a human face. This means, I have not only to make the 'right' connections but also connect the expression in question to my world and myself. Cavell notes that Dickens was very successful in having people imagine the suffering and the poverty of his characters, but he did not succeed in having his readers see 'their connection with these pictures' (CR, p. 354).

In discussing our capacity and our need to read the expressions of another, Cavell draws our attention to what Wittgenstein calls 'interpretation,' that is, our 'seeing

something as something.' In order to see something as an expression of the inner life of a human being we have to go over what I perceive their relevant aspects to be, I have to go over the physiognomy of a situation, of a person:

> To know another mind is to interpret a physiognomy, and the message of this region of the *Investigations* is that this is not a matter of 'mere knowing.' I have to read the physiognomy and see the creature according to my reading, and treat it according to my seeing. The human body is the best picture of the human soul – not, I feel like adding, primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it. The body is the field of expression of the soul. [*CR*, p. 356]

Words, like a face, and like our bodies, are expressions of our inner lives. Knowing a face or a body demands that it speaks to me, that I can understand its meaning. This understanding may happen in an instance or it may slowly dawn on me. In any event, understanding another is never a matter of simply a mere report: it is a matter of what Wittgenstein calls attitude: 'My attitude toward him is an attitude toward a soul' (*Philosophical Investigations II*, p. 178).

To understand, for example, that 'Ilan is in pain' implies that to understand his expressions of his pain is not a matter of a mere report. This understanding demands my reaction and in this reaction I reveal my attitude toward him – of care, of professionalism, or of neglect or of paralyzed love.

The important point is that in order to understand another's words and her expressions as those of a human being, I have to see her as a human being and my attitude will reveal this. It may take a long time to express my knowledge that the other has a soul; and my attitude toward the other might not readily be expressed, as Cavell notes (*CR*, p. 360). Thus, such an attitude is not merely a disposition that is readily available at will: 'It is helpful to take the English word [soul] in its physical sense, as an inflection of myself toward others, an orientation which affects everything and which I may or may not be interested in discovering about myself' (*ibid.*).

The body as veil or as picture of the human soul

The moral of our failing to enter into the fiction of a private language is best captured by Wittgenstein's expression 'the human body is the best picture of the human soul,' says Cavell. The insight of this sentence is overlooked or negated in the fantasy of the private language. And our difficulties in entering this fantasy show how difficult it is to maintain this rejection of the body. On the other hand, the enduring desire to enter into it shows how we are (or at least Wittgenstein is) in the grip of another picture of the human body and its soul.

The body separates Wittgenstein writes on page 223 of the *Investigations*, '"What is internal is hidden from us." ... "I cannot know what is going on in him" is above all a *picture*. It is the convincing expression of a conviction.' The conviction is that the

other is necessarily or metaphysically hidden from me, and that it is the body who does the hiding. The body is the veil of the soul.[23]

This picture of the veiling body expresses, according to Cavell, the hidden nature of the other, and it expresses this hiddenness in the idiom of 'seeing.' The body cloaks him or her. It makes the other invisible. Yet, at the same time, the picture expresses confusion as to 'where the other is.' Is she hidden in her body, some place in there; or is she hidden by her body? Do I need to penetrate the body so as to get to the other; or do I need to discard the body as to set the other free to be seen? (Cf. *CR*, p. 368.)

Wittgenstein's picture of the human body as the best expression of the human soul retrains the idea that the soul, the inner life of another, is in principle somehow visible to me. I could access her inner life in as immediate a way as I can see that this is a table here. But Wittgenstein's picture, according to Cavell, tells a different story as to what blocks this sight. 'The block to my vision of the other is not the other's body but my incapacity to interpret or judge it accurately, to draw the right connections. The suggestion is: I suffer a kind of blindness, but I avoid the issue by projecting this darkness upon the other' (*ibid*). Wittgenstein's picture of the human body as the best expression of the human soul thus retains the idea that there is something that separates us; but that which separates us is not the body but the mind, that is, our ways of looking at each other, our ways of relating:

> If something separates us, comes between us, that can only be a particular aspect or state of the mind itself, a particular *way* in which we relate, or are related (by birth, by law, by force, in love) to one another – our positions, our attitudes, with reference to one another. [*CR*, p. 369]

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23 Cavell talks about expressions such as 'the human body is the best picture of the human soul' or the 'body is the veil of the soul' not so much as pictures but as myths or fragments of a myth (cf. *CR*, p. 365f). Wittgenstein's 'convincing expression of a conviction' (*PI*, p. 223) captures best Cavell's use of 'myth' if we consider the conviction in question to be guiding for our assumptions about and actions in the world. The idea that the 'state is a ship' functions as a myth in that it expresses our sense that 'society is headed somewhere ... and that someone knows' the direction and how to get there, and that we have to obey those who know (cf. *CR*, p. 365). Let me note that this myth of the state ship is different from the metaphorical use of the ship in the German Church-song '*Es kommt ein Schiff geladen*' which compares the ship with the Church and different parts of the ship with different constituents of the Church. (Needless to say, such a metaphor can be extended into a mythological way of talking about the Church as a ship.) The point is that a myth expresses our way of seeing things, how we are struck by things, parts of our *Weltanschauung.* Importantly, a myth has also a normative quality. This is how things strike us that they should be. This is how Cavell comments on Wittgenstein's 'mythological description of the use of a rule' (§ 221), which says 'the rule, once stamped with a particular meaning, traces lines along which it is to be followed through the whole of space' (§ 219): 'So far this little mythology and the actuality of following a rule can live happily together' (*CR*, p. 366). It is not always the case that what we actually do and how things strike us to be, can live happily together, and it is not always clear which side 'will emerge victorious' if in conflict (*ibid.*). In this sense, the myth of the body as veiling the soul might not quite express how we actually do deal with our bodies and souls, but it might express the way how things strike us, how we wish to see things, naturally.

Further, and more importantly Wittgenstein's picture allows for the following observation: We are not separat*ed* by some *thing* (as if there was or should be first oneness which is then reduced to separation), but we *are* separate beings, says Cavell. Our bodies make us 'indexical beings,' as it were; I am here not there and I am this one and not that one. Not something in us or around is separating us, but it is us who are separate.

To my mind, it is precisely *because* we are separate beings that we can draw connections and that we can claim and be claimed by each other. If your pain were my pain, your wincing would not constitute a claim on me; it would be an expression of what I feel. Only because your pain is yours, can your body and your expression invite me to acknowledge you. And only because of this can I fail to acknowledge you. In this sense, the fact that we *are* separate as embodied beings does not necessarily lead to our being separated by something. It can just as well lead to our being bound together by an acknowledgment of what we share – each in his or her body. The body assures the difference between first and third person. As Cavell writes,

> The fantasy of a private language, I suggest, can be understood as an attempt to account for, and protect, our separateness, our unknowingness, our unwillingness or incapacity either to know or to be known. Accordingly, the failure of the fantasy signifies: that there is no assignable end to the depth of us to which language reaches; that nevertheless there is no end to our separateness. We are endlessly separate, for *no* reason. But then we are answerable for everything that comes between us; if not for causing it then for continuing it; if not for denying it then for affirming it; if not for it then to it. [*CR*, p. 369]

Disappointed by the body, disappointed by words Isn't this picture too lenient with the body? Can I not control myself to such a degree that the other cannot read my mind? Is there no way to hide my thoughts? We could answer, along the lines of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, that there are certainly ways to hide our thoughts but there is no*where* to hide them. The body is no hidden storage-facility. Rather, if I hide my thoughts, I do not hide them *in* my body but *with* my body; I try to control my breathing or my heart rate. Or I train myself to laugh or sit in a certain manner, to control my glances and to prevent my pinky from sticking into the air while holding a cup of coffee. And more precisely, a body thus trained does not just hide thoughts, it also expresses an inner life of someone who feels the need to hide.

In many instances, one person or another who is perceptive enough or who is simply in a similar boat may make the right connections. She may see the trained body as an expression of a suppressed inner life. The training may reach such perfection (and the oblivion of neighbors, colleagues and friends such a degree) that, for example, cues for suppressed homosexuality are read as more or less standard masculinity. Yet, again, what is hidden here – the true inner life by some outer charade? I think it is more apt to say that one way of thinking of myself is hiding another way of perceiving myself. In order for the hiding to be successful I have to convince myself that 'I am not *really* like this,' or that 'I shouldn't be like this,' or that 'from 9–5 I should be someone else.' It is not the body hiding the mind, but rather mind-and-body hiding mind-and-body. And I am reminded here of what

Cavell wrote early in *The Claim of Reason* about the frustration of the failure of criteria to tell me with 'certainty' whether or not someone is in pain:

> What does speaking of 'locating the pain by prodding' as part of the grammar of pain, as marking a criterion for pain, really come to? I prod; the other winces, groans, shrinks from the touch ... Does any of that get me one bit nearer the pain, the pain itself? And isn't *that* what I wanted to know? Isn't that what there is to *be* known in knowing someone is in pain? ... Of course if he satisfies 'all the criteria' marked out by 'all the parts of the grammar of pain' then, to be sure, it is exceedingly likely that he is in pain, i.e., that he is not feigning, etc. ... But *certain*? And if not, why speak of grammar and criteria? It is all just very good evidence. And adding what he *says* just makes matters worse; for now I have to *believe* him, and determine whether he means by his descriptions what I would mean if I gave them. – So our criteria are disappointing. They do not assure that my words reach all the way to the pain of others. They just do not do the very thing they were meant to do. [*CR*, p. 79]

Again, we are left with the expressions of a body and a need to interpret them. The difficulties of interpreting another body as being expressive of the inner life of another person are real. Yet, putting them in a metaphysical frame where the body hides the soul is glossing over those very difficulties that are difficulties of attitude. Thus, the disappointment with our expressions is related to the body. The body does not hide but is open for inspection and interpretation. The body is not transparent either but it is in need of interpretation. This forces me to be willing to interpret the other and to present myself for interpretation. The body becomes a site for responsibility, that is, for my responsibility for seeing another as a human person, and for my responsibility to make myself visible for the other.

Speaking my words Cavell's connection between 'reading an expression' and 'reading a physiognomy' presents not only a reinterpretation of the myth that word and meaning are related like body and soul. Moreover, my words are sites of expressions of what *I* mean. The picture in which grammar is hiding what I have to say or is saying it for me, the picture reflecting Cordelia's predicament, is reminiscent of the picture of the body as veil. In this sense, we can say that Cordelia is not only deprived of words that could express her feelings for her father, she is also deprived of a body that could express her inner life. All that is accessible to her are conventional words and a conventional body. This conventional body is hiding or suppressing her own body ('own' understood as not subjected to the rule of convention).

Consequently, the picture of the human body as the best expression of the human soul is reminiscent of the fact that *I* speak in my words – or that I am called to do so. Cavell writes,

> I would like to say that the topic of our attachments to our words is allegorical of our attachment to ourselves and to other persons. Something of this sort we were prepared for. My words are my expressions of my life; I respond to the words of others as *their* expressions, i.e., respond not merely to what their words mean but equally to *their meaning* of them. I take *them* to mean ('imply') something in or by their words; or to be speaking ironically, etc. [*CR*, p. 355, italics added]

If I have to speak my words the question becomes, what are *my* words? (Cf. *CR*, p. 356.) How can I make sure that my words are mine?

Here we can hear an echo of the question of which sensations are my sensations. Cavell mentions that a token-type distinction would not be helpful here. Anybody could just as well have a token of this same type. The fact that I have this token and not that one, does not bring out what is important about the uniqueness of my sensation. The fact that the rich man and the pauper have both a quarter (the rich has this one and the poor has that one), does not capture the uniqueness of having a quarter for each of them:

> The importance of my sensation is the fact that I have it. The uniqueness in question points not to some necessary difference between my sensations and yours (for there may be no significant difference between them), but to the necessary difference between being you and being me, for the fact that we are two. [*Ibid*]

My words are not uniquely mine in the sense that you have no access to using them (because they refer to only my sensations or because I alone know how to use them according to the rules which are my rules). My words are mine simply because I use them. In using them, I express myself, give them the force of what I want to say, imply, etc.

It is important to note here that while the 'fact that we are two' may be necessary to give uniqueness to my words and sensations, this very fact is not necessarily acknowledged. Othello's dealings with Desdemona, and Lear's predicament, show the desire to avoid this 'necessary fact.' And it shows in the case of Lear at least, that this avoidance also denies the other the right to be herself. Cordelia is not allowed to express and realize her love, to give voice to her inner life; there were no words for her at Lear's court. There exists, in short, a temptation to have my words speak for you, or to substitute your words for my words. Again, the practical difficulty in speaking my words should not be shrouded by a metaphysical quest to make sure that my words can be mine in a way that they can never be yours.

On the other hand, we can now begin to see more clearly the philosophical impact of these practical difficulties of understanding another's expressions as expressions of a human being and of making myself understood and of owning my words.

Instead of asking how much of our language is public, and whether there is a space where the public cannot reach, the question now becomes *what does it mean to share a language*? How do I speak for myself, how am I spoken for by others, how can I be silent and where am I silenced? The last part of this chapter therefore leads us then into an investigation of the communal nature of language, and into the linguistic nature of Cavell's vision of community.

Speaking for oneself, being spoken for, and silence?

Cordelia's silence raises a further and important feature of Cavell's interpretation of the skeptical impulse: the *need to express our inner lives*. Cordelia is not just denied expression of something in her. She is denied being the person she is. Only because France speaks for her can she live. And live she can only at his court where there are words for her.

Furthermore, we can say that Cordelia is not only deprived of words that could express her feelings for her father, she is also deprived of a body that could express her inner life. All that is accessible to her are conventional words and a conventional body. This conventional body is hiding or suppressing her own body ('own' understood as not subjected to the rule of convention). We will follow this line of thought in the next part. What is not in words is not in the world; and what is not in the world is not accessible in some other intimate or private way. This mutual dependency is another facet of the fact that 'outer' or 'inner' are manners of speaking and not metaphysical distinctions. As much as words are in need of an inner life to be meaningful, our inner life is in need of an outer expression, a body, for it to be real.

The imperative of human existence Cavell addresses this point most clearly in his reading of Emerson. In 'Being Odd, Getting Even,' Cavell highlights what he calls Emerson's 'imperative of human existence: that it must prove or declare itself' (*IQO*, p. 106).[24]

Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' provides a fresh answer to Descartes' *cogito*. This answer results from Emerson's having posed the Cartesian question for himself. In so doing, Emerson is taking on the labor of understanding the skeptic as a human being. The poet attempts to see the philosopher's worry as a genuine human worry.

This worry is expressed in the Cartesian convictions that my existence is in need of proof and that there *can be* such a proof. Moreover, the idea that my existence is in need of proof implies that I have to be capable of formulating such a proof. To exist means to know and to be able to say that and how I can exist.

Cavell connects a line from Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' ('Man is timid, and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not to say "I think," "I am," but quotes some saint or sage') with the following formulation of the *cogito* found in Descartes' Second Meditation: '*I am*, *I exist*, is necessarily true every time that I pronounce it or conceive it in my mind' (*IQO*, p. 107). For Cavell, Emerson's observation presses the following question: what happens if we do *not* pronounce or conceive in our mind that we exist or that we are? In fact, Descartes poses this question in the Second Meditation, and the strict connection between 'I think' and 'I exist' brings him to the assumption that the mind always thinks.

It is at this point that Emerson takes on Descartes by denying that 'I (mostly) do think, that the "I" mostly gets into my thinking, as it were. From this follows that the skeptical possibility is realized – that I do not exist' (*IQO*, p. 108).[25] If thinking 'I exist' is essential for my existing, and if thinking demands expression, then Descartes' question of his metaphysical identity ('what am I, I who am sure I

24 Stanley Cavell, 'Being Odd, Getting Even,' in *In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 105–30 (henseforth *IQO*).

25 'A certain willingness for visibility is the way Emerson puts his version of the *cogito*'s demand in his taking on of Descartes for America, and his claim that we are ashamed to say "I am," afraid of the exposure of ourselves to the consciousness of others (say, of otherness, so of exposure of ourselves); from which Emerson draws the conclusion that we mostly do not exist, but haunt the world, ghosts of ourselves,' Stanley Cavell, 'Naughty Orators. Negation of Voice in *Gaslight*,' in *CT*, pp. 47–78, p. 71.

exist'?) finds what Cavell calls a grammatical answer: 'I am a being who to exist, must say I exist, or must acknowledge my existence – claim it, stake it, enact it' (*IQO*, p. 109). Implied in this grammatical answer is a twofold weakness. First, the answer does not preclude any way in which the I enacts its being. There is no single trajectory for the becoming of the I. Secondly, the proof for my existence only works while enacting it, 'for what I prove is the existence of a creature who *can* enact its existence, as exemplified in actually giving the proof, not one who at all times does in fact enact it' (*ibid.*). After all, Cavell begun his reflections on Emerson and Descartes with Emerson's contention that 'man ... dares not say "I think".' The transient nature of the proof mirrors the transient nature of the existence.

This transient nature of the proof and of human existence points for Descartes to the necessity of God's existence as preserver of our human existence. If we were the sole authors of our own existence, doubt and transience would not enter into our minds. Cavell reads Emerson as writing in and for a situation where the responsibility for authoring of the human self cannot be relegated to or avoided by the idea of a (Cartesian) creator God. Emerson points to

> ... a sense in which the absence of doubt and desire of which Descartes speaks in proving that God, not he, is the author of himself is a *continuing task*, not a property, a task in which the goal, or the product of the process, is not a *state of being* but a moment of change, say of becoming – a transience of being, a being of transience. [*IQO*, p. 111, italics added]

Yet, what does it mean to be the author of my existence, or to enact it and create it? Does this idea not skirt 'the edge of metaphysical non-sense' (*IQO*, p. 110)? In what sense does it make sense to speak of an *un*-authored or *un*created existence? Instead of imagining self-creation as beginning 'with dust of the ground and magic breath,' Cavell proposes that self-creation begins with 'an uncreated human being and the power of thinking' (*IQO*, p. 111). An uncreated life is, in Emerson's terms, a life of 'conformity,' a life in quotation marks, as it were; it is a life in which my own expression of self are replaced or avoided by quotes.

Not all forms of quoting, however, result from this avoidance or incapability of self-creation, only those in which the act of quoting expresses 'a continuous loss of individual possibility in the face of some overpowering competitor' (*ibid.*). Remember that Goneril, for example, accepts as her own the words that Lear puts in her mouth. Cordelia refuses to say words to Lear that are not authorized by her. She refuses to use his words to express her feelings; yet she allows France to speak her mind.

Not so much *whether* I use the words of another, but *how* I use them seems the issue in quoting. Cavell relates this to remarks about 'good posture' in Emerson. 'Sitting,' that is, claiming what is my space and disclaiming what is not my own, is the posture of 'being at home in the world, or [of] taking possession' (*IQO*, p. 113). 'Standing' signals that it takes daring to assume one's individual existence. Quoting in this sense is using words in a 'bad posture,' of not claiming what is mine and of not daring to express myself. It is relegating that which is for me to do to others.

Cavell notes, moreover, that Emerson himself quotes in the very sentence that denounces quoting: 'Man is timid and apologetic ... he dares not say "I think," "I am," but quotes some saint or sage.' Cavell calls this 'a gag,' in which we can find three interrelated ideas about language (*ibid.*). First, the gag points to the fact that we inherit our words: 'Words are before I am; they are common' (*ibid.*). As we have seen in the discussion of the 'private,' 'language,' 'argument,' it is a fiction to believe that I have words that are just mine, words nobody could use but me. My community gives the words that I need to express myself and to create myself to me. In this sense we can understand Cavell's earlier claim that the 'soul is impersonal.' The fabric of the inner life, that which gives it expression and existence, is shared and communal. Cavell wrote in *The Claim of Reason* with reference to Wittgenstein's work:

> I think one moral of the *Investigations* as a whole can be drawn as follows: The fact, and the state of, your (inner) life cannot take its importance from anything special in it. However far you have gone with it, you will find that what is common is there before you are ... The soul is impersonal. [*CR*, p. 361]

Secondly, due to the expressive nature of language, the words that I use to enact myself, are fed back into the wider community of language users, as my words, as words with a truth-evaluable content, and moreover as words with force.

Speaking for others This circulation of words (my inheriting them and my giving them force and context) is not only necessary for the individual to enact him – or herself. Rather, it is important to keep language alive, that is, to allow words to be projected into new contexts and for language to remain flexible and creative, and for language to be taught.[26] Only because of our going on in language (that is, mine and yours, and my accepting yours as ours and vice-versa) can language 'go on.'

Since there is no rule governing how to go on in a new context but only the naturalness of my projection, I cannot tell beforehand which projection will be received as natural by us. My use of this word in this new context is an invitation to follow me in my projection, to see whether you can understand and use the word in the same way.

Let us remember that Wittgenstein's method of referring to what 'we' say implied an invitation to consider whether we can find a sample of such words in our vocabulary or whether we can accept his sample as a sound one. This invitation is, as we have seen, for Cavell a claim to community, a claim that rests on nothing more than my assumption that I made sense: 'It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me from others, from all others, from myself ... The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason' (*CR*, p. 20).

Whoever told a joke that didn't 'go over,' knows this feeling of isolation from others. The experience of unsuccessfully trying to make myself understood to my lover, for example, can be an instance where my failed projection may isolate me

26 Cavell writes that this amounts to the claim that 'writing is a matter, say the decision, of life and death, and ... what this comes to is the inheriting of language, an owning of words, which does not remove them from circulation but rather returns them, as to life' (*IQO*, p. 114).

from myself. I don't quite have the words to express myself, to make sense to him – but then, which words are there to express what I mean, what do I want to say?

Likewise, the basis on which I teach the use of a word, or what it means to go on in language is not an abstract rule or convention. All I can say, this is what *we* do, and thereby claim that my samples of what we say are valid for our language use. Let us recall that Cavell talked about teaching a language as initiation into forms of life:

> We initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world. For that to be possible we must make ourselves exemplary and take responsibility for that assumption of authority; and the initiate must be able to follow us, in however rudimentary a way, *naturally* (look where our finger points, laugh at what we laugh at, comfort what we comfort ...); and he must *want* to follow us (care about our approval, like a smile better than a frown ...). 'Teaching' here would mean something like 'showing them what we say and do', and 'accepting what they say and do as what we say and do', etc.; and this will be more than we know, or can say. [*CR*, p. 178]

Just as learning a language implies being initiated into a community, so teaching a language implies speaking for this community (*CR*, p. 28). I have to be willing to present myself as a master of a language. Without this willingness to speak for others, projections would be impossible, learning would be impossible and thus speaking a language would be impossible. Learning and having a language presupposes living in a community: 'But if I am to have my own voice in it, I must be speaking for others and allow others to speak for me. The alternative to speaking for myself representatively ... is not speaking for myself privately. The alternative is having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute' (*ibid.*).

Being spoken for Since speaking representatively is a prerequisite for speaking for oneself, it likewise involves accepting that others can and do speak for me. Cavell distinguishes here between others who speak for me in mutuality (that is, others who speak my mind) and others who speak *instead* of me (in the way parents speak for their children) (*CR*, p. 27).

If my saying *this* is what we call 'having pain' establishes an instance or a sample of *our* language use, then this sample is also supposed to be normative (*this* and not *that* is what we call 'having pain'). This *is* what having pain *is*, and I expect you to agree with my claim and to use these words in a similar way. Likewise, your saying *this* is what we call 'having joy' constitutes a normative sample for me. As we have seen already in the previous chapter, speaking a language happens within a community whose boundaries and hierarchies are not clearly established. Every initiated language user can speak as a role model representing the whole community and instantiating the standards of correctness.

Who, then, counts as an initiated language user? Would it make sense in Cavell's vision of language to consider, for example, only the members of the *Académie française* as initiated members who can speak representatively for French-language users?

On the one hand, one could say that the *Académie* speaks representatively for the forms of life that are embodied by *this* kind of French. To shun *le weekend* and to

talk about *le fin du semaine* places the speaker in the context of a specific social and intellectual community. In a similar way, one needs to be initiated into the language of lawyers, medical professionals, regional communities, etc., to be a representative speaker for and in those communities.

On the other hand, something different is at stake in the case of someone to be initiated into the language game of, for example, 'pointing toward something.' What would we think about a man 'who did not naturally follow an order given by a pointing gesture by moving in the direction shoulder to hand, but in the opposite direction' (*PI*, § 114)? Cavell comments on this and similar examples that we know that such a person is not 'completely unintelligible to us; we feel he *must* be able to follow our directions. And we know we are impotent in this moment to get to him. The cause of our anxiety is that *we cannot make our selves intelligible*' to him (*CR*, p. 115).

Whether or not I can make myself intelligible to him depends on his 'natural understanding,' his capacity to find natural what we would find natural. It depends on 'our mutual attunement in judgments' (*ibid.*). A person who finds it natural to follow a pointing gesture by moving in the direction hand to shoulder, would provoke the question of whether we are living in the same world, whether he and I are thinking similar thoughts. *And here we can find therefore a connection between material-object and other mind skepticism, since making ourselves intelligible to another in our words involves a claim to community, which in turn involves the question of whether and how we are in community to begin with*.[27]

What is at stake here is not a specific regional community with its idiolect but our capacity to communicate at all. In the case of language games such as 'referring to' (or 'pointing to,' 'expressing my inner life,' etc.), everyone who successfully refers to, points to, or expresses her inner life, is an initiate in having a language, and hence can speak representatively as such. Even if the master and mistress might consider their servant to be too lowly for the servant to speak back to them, they still assume that the servant understands the language game 'pointing.' What is at stake here is not this or that community but our community as beings so complex as to be burdened by language, or our human community.

These considerations show Cavell's vision of language is based on a profound vision of mutuality. We can and do speak for each other. In this mutuality we are equally 'masters' of language and consequently 'masters' of each other. To have a language implies being fated to live together with others, to present one to them while representing others, and being represented by others as human beings.

These considerations show, as well, how fragile and thin the ground is on which we assume we can live together as a community of human beings. Could the master and mistress not think that instead of understanding the language game

27 This connection speaks to Rorty's critique that Cavell fails to argue for the connection between 'skepticism in some deep and romantic sense' and 'skepticism in the narrow sense, the sense used in ritual interchanges between philosophy professors (Green and Bain, Bradley and Moore, Austin and Ayer).' Rorty claims that Cavell doesn't 'show us that "skepticism" is a good name for the impulse which leads grownups to try to educate themselves, cultures to try to criticize themselves,' Richard Rorty, 'From Epistemology to Romance: Cavell on Skepticism,' *The Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1981): 759–74, p. 762f.

'pointing,' they are in fact playing a form of 'fetch' with the servant? Do we not, over and over again, reach limits of our understanding so that the question painfully arises of whether or not we are living in the same world, thinking similar thoughts, whether this is *human* or not? And finally, what are the conditions under which the commonality of language is preserved or rejected?

We speak for others and are rebuffed, or we discover that an attunement in judgment that we assumed is in fact not existent. There are limits to our common understanding, and to our commonality in language and forms of life:

> And when these limits are reached, when our attunements are dissonant, I cannot go below them to firmer ground. The power I felt in my breath as my words flew to their effect now vanishes into thin air. For not only does [the other] not receive me, because his natural reactions are not mine; but my understanding is found to go no further than my own natural reactions bear it. I am thrown back upon myself; I as it were turn my palms outward, as if to exhibit the kind of creature I am, and declare my ground occupied, only mine, ceding yours ... The anxiety lies not just in the fact that my understanding *has* limits, but that I must *draw* them, on apparently no more ground than my own. [*CR*, p. 115]

Emersonian Authorship as the Office of All Language Users

A precondition for language use is the affirmation and not the suppression, 'of otherness, that is to say, of difference and sameness, call these liberty and equality.' We can understand therefore how Cavell links his vision of language with ethics (*IQO*, p. 119). Cavell, furthermore, links language and psychology by claiming that linguistic expressiveness is a precondition for our having an inner life. Consequently, to the degree that language is the expressive body of the human soul it is a shared body with unclear boundaries, in which the domains of belonging, of self and other are not clearly established and need negotiation. We only have our selves in mutuality.

Both the psychological and the socio-ethical strand of Cavell's vision of language come together in his reading of Emerson's notion of genius and declaration, 'I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*' (*IQO*, p. 114).

Cavell writes 'the point I emphasize here is only that the life-giving power of words, of saying "I," is your readiness to subject your desire to words (call it Whim), to become intelligible with no assurance that you will be taken up' (*ibid.*). Thus, language calls us to be authors of our words, to enact and thereby to prove our existence through them; and language calls us to let others be the authors of their words, that is, to acknowledge that others are capable of proving themselves. Finally, language calls us to stand for humanity. This implies three points: first, Emerson's writing about himself is accurate only as far as his writing is understood as portraying his fellow human beings (in good and bad posture) and as being written on their behalf. Secondly, his writing enacts humanity in its range of possibilities of becoming. And finally, Emerson bears humanity, stands up for it, and protects it against itself.

Performance of self as tuition and method

Cavell's summing up of Emerson's vision of linguistic authorship as expressed in the phrase 'I will stand for humanity' presents us not only with a formula for Emerson's teaching, that is, his tuition. Moreover, I see in these words an epigrammatic formulation for what can be seen as Cavell's understanding of the proper philosophical method.[28]

The confessional philosophical style of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* is meant to present us with possible insights in the torments of *a* human mind. Yet, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, these confessions claim to reflect something about *the* human mind, presenting us with questions and worries that are representative for us all.[29] The basis of these claims is the confessional philosopher's intuition that she speaks not only for herself. What she sees as a natural projection is natural for other human beings as well. The confessions are thus meant as explorations into what it means to be human. They invite us to see whether we find instances of similar worries in our lives.

More than this, however, these philosophical confessions are *performances* of such worries and struggle. In this performative way, these confessions stand for humanity. Cavell wishes to show that – in the words of Zarathustra – 'Emerson does not say "I" but performs "I"' (*IQO*, p. 115).[30]

The philosophical method is to stand for humanity by performing what it means to be human and to be worried by language. Likewise, the way out of the worry has to be performed, as well. To stand for humanity implies that the confessional philosopher has to enact and present a way of being human that allows us to live with the burden of language.

Emerson performs his cogito Cavell sees Emerson's 'performance of his cogito' exemplarily expressed in the lines 'My life is for itself and not for a spectacle' (*IQO*, p. 118); and he reads these lines as pronouncing Emerson's aversion of shame. My life is not to be lived under the imperative to avoid the eyes of others or under the rule to please them or to be controlled by their approval or disapproval. The 'healthy attitude of human nature,' comments Cavell, 'is disdain itself, specifically disdain of good opinion' (*CT*, p. 35). Emersonian self-reliance uses our 'primitive capacity to

28 In the following I will be using 'the confessional philosopher' to refer to those philosophers who adopt this proper philosophical method, in distinction from 'the philosopher' who represented the skeptical voice in Wittgenstein's *Investigations*.

29 'In confessing you do not explain or justify, but describe how it is with you. And confession, unlike dogma, is not to be believed but tested, and accepted or rejected. Nor is it the occasion for accusation, except of yourself, and by implication those who find themselves in you' (*MWM*, p. 71).

30 Cavell quotes here 'On the Despisers of the Body,' in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 35.

think in aversion to the given' (*CT*, p. 70).[31] Cavell's reading of Emerson, as well as his later analyses of opera and voice, reflect and react to a vision of:

> A world of absolute unoriginality, in which since nothing originates in any soul, there is nothing but suffering, however much vexed motion there may be in such a world. It is a world of absolute philistinism ... not obviously attributable to any particular class or any particular political orientation, terrified by change, petrified by unchange, as if making explicit that Nietzsche's characterization of nihilism as a revenge against time's 'It was' is a the same time a revenge against the foreseeable future.[32]

In this world, thinking (and thus creating) can only happen in an aversion to the dominant culture of unoriginality. Yet, to 'live my life for itself,' does not imply that I live my life in privacy. Rather, I live my life for myself in the plain view of others – and for others to see it, acknowledge it, or reject it. Cavell quotes from the fifth paragraph of 'Self-Reliance':

> The man is as it were clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with *éclat* he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this. [Emerson, in Cavell, *IQO*, p. 119]

To live my life not for a spectacle but to live it for itself, does not deny the fact that our lives are spectacles *to* each other or that we have to account for or take responsibility for what we display to each other. Awareness of this visibility is a consequence of being jailed by our consciousness. Without consciousness we would live the lives of plants (or stones in the idiom of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*), which simply are what they are. Emerson continues the same passage where he decries man's timidity to say 'I think,' or 'I am,' with the following observation: man 'is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose ... they are for what they are; they exist with God today' (in *IQO*, p. 112). Under the conditions of Cartesian skepticism, with its search for a proof for individual human existence, we do not just have a soul or self, but having a self means to be aware of it: having a self presupposes being self-conscious. On the basis of Cavell's interpretation of the body as the best expression for the soul, and of his reflections on the fantasy of a 'private' 'language,' we can conclude that having a self likewise presupposes being body-conscious. This means that we are to be conscious of our exposure to others and of our separateness as well as our elusive origins and desires.

Furthermore, as beings in language we are not simply what we are, as plants or stones, but we are what we *become* for others. We have already noticed how for the Cavellian Emerson being human is a matter of becoming and of projecting our humanity in new ways. By projecting new words into new contexts, we stake out new forms of using human words and with them new forms of being human. The creativity and flexibility of language is the locus in which the creativity and flexibility of what it means to be human is instantiated.

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31 'Naughty Orators. Negation of Voice in *Gaslight*,' in *CT*, pp. 47–78.

32 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy. Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 167.

Cavell writes in *The World Viewed* (perhaps somewhat ironically) in the form of a historical sketch:

> If it makes sense to speak of the Greeks as having discovered the self, or of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as having discovered childhood, then we can say that our recent accomplishment has been the discovery of adolescence, the point at which one's life is to be chosen and gives oneself a name, and that our task is to discover the existence of community. Revolution, which begins in the nineteenth century, is society's self-dramatization; as romanticism, which continues it, is the self's self-dramatization. But then drama was still a form of acknowledgment.[33]

Emerson's performance of self involves therefore a performance of this self- or body-consciousness of the facts that we are visible to each other and that humanity is a matter of becoming not being. This implies a performance of the exposure of our bodies to each other. Cartesian skepticism and its attempts to prove human existence lead to a split between the outer of our bodies and the inner of our souls. In contrast, 'the price of Emerson's proof of human existence, our exposure to the consciousness of otherness (say our subjection to surveillance), is that our relation to ourselves is theatricalized' (*CT,* p. 72).

Theatricalization of the obvious Theatricalization is the presentation of that which is too obvious to be recognized, yet which needs to be represented so that we can either acknowledge or reject it. The point is that the obvious cannot be *known* (or doubted); yet it can be rejected or acknowledged. I am reminded of Wittgenstein's remark that certain things are not in doubt for a reasonable person ('der Vernünftige hat gewisse Zweifel nicht,' *Über Gewißheit*, § 220). That which we cannot reasonably doubt is nevertheless in need of representation or of theatricalization, in Cavell's words, because it is in need of acknowledgment. What Cavell said about confessions is pertinent at this point as well. The content of a confession is not a matter of belief but a matter of receiving, acknowledging or rejecting. I cannot believe (or doubt) that I am sitting here in the gaze of others but I can reject or acknowledge this fact about myself.

What is too obvious to be recognized is our humanity – the fact that I and that you are human beings, and that we are fated to live with one another or reject one another. A lack of theatricalization is not a *denial* of our obvious humanity. Rather, it is a way to neutralize our connection to it.[34] We would be neither in a position to acknowledge nor to reject our obvious humanity if it remained un-theatricalized.

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33 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, 1979), p. 94.

34 I use here as analogy what Cavell wrote about the world filmed in color. Black-and-white movies dramatize or theatricalize the world that we then can accept (or reject) as depictions of our human reality. Movies in color, on the other hand, neutralize our connection with the world thus filmed (*ibid.*, p. 95). These movies neutralize but do not deny our connection, since denial would presuppose dramatization.

Refusing to see the obvious: the slave-owner case In which way, however, is our being human obvious? Is it obvious for the master or the mistress to see their servant as a human being, with language, who can respond and speak back? Or could it not well be that they see the slave as a form of 'live-stock' or yet another animal to be kept in the house? Cavell notes that statements like 'slaves are just live-stock' cannot quite be meant (*CR*, p. 373). Such statements are said in a situation when the institution of slavery cannot be justified but by a rejection of the slave's humanity.

In this situation the slave-owners *decide* not to see the servant's humanity. This decision to reject the servant's humanity is based on an avoidance of seeing the aspect of the servant's physiognomy, of his or her body, that would strike the masters as human. Importantly, these are aspects that are not hidden but there for all to see. Couldn't it be, however, asks Cavell, that the slave-owners could be educated to see or overlook those aspects? Maybe they need to learn how to see the human traits in this particular other, or in the class of those others. Could we educate the masters to recognize a human being, in the same way we educate them to tell a Louis XV from a Louis XVI table?

Cavell contends that what is missing for the slavers is not a piece of information. They know all there is to know about human beings. They simply *see* some human beings this way.

What are the slavers missing if they miss recognizing the humanity of 'their' slaves? In a chilling paragraph, Cavell writes about what he describes as the 'more or less mythological' slave-owner:

> What he is missing is not something about slaves exactly, and not exactly about human beings. He is rather missing something about himself, or rather something about his connection with these people, his internal relation with them so to speak. When he wants to be served at table by a black hand, he would not be satisfied to be served by a black paw. When he rapes a slave or takes her as a concubine, he does not feel that he has, by that fact itself, embraced sodomy. When he tips a black taxi driver (something he never does with a white driver) it does not occur to him that he might more appropriately have patted the creature fondly on the neck. He does not go to great length either to convert his horses to Christianity or to prevent their getting wind of it. Everything in his relation to his slaves shows that he treats them as more or less human – his humiliations of them, his disappointments, his jealousies, his fears, his punishments, his attachments ... [*CR*, p. 376]

What the slaver lacks is not a piece of information. He refuses to see a connection between him and his slaves; more specifically he refuses the notion that the slaves are others to him (*ibid.*). Cavell expresses in the following terms this refusal to acknowledge the connection between slave owner and slaves: the master 'takes himself to be private with respect to them, in the end unknowable by them' (*CR*, p. 377). The master considers the slaves as not having the power to acknowledge him, to see him as their other, to see his experience the way he sees it. The master does not allow himself to be seen through their eyes (*ibid.*).

This refusal to be seen echoes Cavell's discussion of Othello's rejection of Desdemona. As we have seen, for Othello to be know implied to be known 'like a women,' that is, as the object of desire. Like Othello, who rejects Desdemona so that he can avoid the mutuality of desire, the slave-owner rejects the humanity of the

slaves so that he can avoid and reject the mutuality of power. In terms of language and acknowledgment, such a mutuality of power would imply that the slave-owner would see his shared humanity in those whom he enslaves. And this would mean that the slave-owner would acknowledge the fact that the slaves create an image of humanity for themselves and for all of 'us.'

A matter of justice As Cavell's discussion of Shakespeare's tragedies showed, the linguistic characterization of this mode of silencing should not make us overlook its deadly force:

> To admit that the slaveowner [sic!] regards the slave as a kind of human being bases slavery on nothing more than some indefinite claim of difference, some inexpressible ground of exclusion of others from existence in the realm of justice. It is too close to something we might at any time discover. [*CR*, p. 378]

It is important to note that Cavell describes this refusal of acknowledgment by the master as a refusal to acknowledge that certain others fall within the realm of justice. The slaver denies those he wants to enslave the right to speak for *us*, he refuses to be spoken for by *this one*, and places the ones he decides to see as slaves outside the realm of linguistic mutuality.

The basis for this exclusion from the realm of mutuality, which is the realm of justice, is not a denial of the supremacy of justice. The slave-owner may be as eloquent on this as he is knowledgeable about human beings. The slave-owner's basis for the exclusion is rather an 'appeal to history, to a form, or rather to a way, of life: this is what he does. He believes exactly what justice denies, that history and indefinite difference can justify his social difference of position' (*CR*, p. 376). For justice to be done, the slave-owner is in need of a change of perception, a modification of his way of seeing. The slaver has to acknowledge that *this* is what he does, that is, that he chooses to overlook the humanity of another human being.

How can he do this? Cavell says that 'if it makes sense to speak of seeing human beings as human beings, then it makes sense to imagine that a human being may lack the capacity to see human beings as human beings. It would make sense to ask whether someone may be soul-blind' (*CR*, p. 378).

This brings to the forefront the full burden of Wittgenstein's thought that we 'notice' a human being as such. In order for us to notice or know that this is a human being we must assume that sometimes we do *not* notice:

> Whether or not we acknowledge others is not a matter of choice, any more than accepting the presence of the world is a matter of choosing to see or not to see it. Some persons sometimes are capable of certain blindness or deafness toward others; but, for example, avoidance of the presence of others is not blindness or deafness to their claim upon us; it is as conclusive an acknowledgment that they are present as murdering them would be. [*DK*, p. 103]

The best-case? The moral of the considerations about the slave-owner is that we do indeed sometimes 'fail' to notice that this person here is a human being. It is one of the most upsetting and anxiety-inducing facts that we can do and do this to each

other. Unlike in the case of 'recognizing this table as a Louis XV table' or 'seeing this table here' there is no best-case scenario for 'seeing this person as a human being.' It would not help to provide someone with a manual nor would it help to go closer, to turn on the lights or to have him touch it/him/her: 'In the case of objects I assume that I *see* them, see *them*. Here in the case of another human being "my identification of you as a human being" is not merely an identification *of* you but *with* you. This is something more than merely *seeing* you. Call it empathic projection' (*CR*, p. 421). Empathetic projection is good enough for our calling something a human being, but it is not the best case, either. To see someone as a human being is a dialogical enterprise. Potentially, at least, the other can reveal herself to me.[35]

Cavell's contention that there is no best case for knowing another as human implies that other mind skepticism cannot be construed along the lines of material object skepticism. 'Knowing another person' (another body as best picture of a soul) involves a different form of knowing than the knowing involved in 'knowing a material object' (cf. *CR*, p. 423ff).[36] To know another as a human being not only involves identification with the other; it also involves the sense of our separateness. I cannot step outside of my body to 'feel what you feel as you feel it.' Knowing another as a human being involves however also the possibility (and as we have seen necessity) that the other can step 'outside of their confinement from me' by expressing themselves and presenting themselves to me (*CR*, p. 428).

Cavell gives three reasons, why he thinks that skepticism regarding other minds cannot be construed along the lines of 'material object skepticism,' that is by providing a best case that is then shown to fail. First, 'I cannot be skeptical enough: the other is intact, anyway in being' (*CR*, p. 432). Even if I cannot *know* what is on another's mind, I still have to assume that he is there in being. Secondly: 'I cannot survive my skepticism: the world does not disappear but I from it.' In contrast, I can survive my skepticism if it comes to other minds (*ibid.*). Fleming comments on this point that 'I must place the world outside of me as an object to which my skeptical doubts can be directed, and thus I am forced to stand apart from the world in which I normally live.'[37] By failing to acknowledge Cordelia, on the other hand, Lear enacts his blindness to the world, and he refuses to be seen by it. Likewise, by declaring that others do not inhabit the world, I am experiencing a 'generalized and massive *trompe l'ame*' (*CR*, p. 424). I cannot simply arrive at this, his massive failure of the soul by generalizing from the fact that I sometimes misidentify something as human

35 The issue of 'other mind skepticism' is whether there *are* others that I know to be *humans* (persons, that have bodies as the best pictures for their souls). Thus, I could be skeptical about two things: first, do these beings that I see as persons, really exist (or are they figments of my imagination or of my dreams etc.). Second, are these beings that I see as humans really humans (or are they androids, witches, zombies, etc.)?

36 If we reconstruct '*x* knows *y* as *F*' as a trivalent relation *k*, where *x* is a human being, then *k* varies whether *y* is a human being or a material object. To perceive other mind skepticism in terms of knowing implies the claim that 'to know that this is a tomato' and 'to know that you are a human being' involve the same type of relationship *k*. In less analytic language: I can say 'I got to know Charles over the years,' but it would make little sense to say that about a tomato.

37 Fleming, *State of Philosophy*, p. 123.

(when in fact it is an android) and sometimes misidentify something as not human. Yet, I do this already, and the fact is that 'the others do not vanish when a given case fails me' (*CR*, p. 425).

Third, and most importantly, there is no everyday alternative to skepticism of other minds. There is 'no competing common sense of the matter; there is nothing about other minds that satisfies me for *all* (practical) purposes' (*CR*, p. 432). The conclusions of skepticism regarding other minds do not come as a surprise. I already know that I cannot be sure about the existence of other humans, even less so about what they really think or feel (*ibid.*). I would be foolish to close my eyes to *these* doubts.

I can and need to shut my eyes regarding the doubt expressed by material object skepticism. Cavell writes 'it is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the *threat* of skepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness only love has it' (*CR*, p. 431).[38]

After philosophy has opened our human eyes to see the doubt it is nevertheless possible to shut them again, and to live with the doubt and in the world. This possibility of living with doubt is not based on argument, as we have seen: 'You are bound to fall out of love with your argument, and you may thereupon forget that the world is wonder enough, as it stands' (*ibid.*). Living *with* the doubt that the skeptic had made us see involves a conversion back to embracing the ordinary. This conversion, however, can only happen if we address the underlying worry about language which the skeptic expresses.

'Living' our skepticism means for Cavell that there is no alternative to its doubt. In the case of material object skepticism, the alternative to its doubt is the confinement and certainty provided by speaking in the context of our ordinary forms of life. As a 'normal human being' I am bound to take this alternative, says Cavell (*CR*, p. 448):

> My intuition that, on the contrary, I can live my skepticism with respect to other minds, is an intuition that there is no comparable, general alternative to the radical doubt of the existence of others; that we may already be as outside, in community, as we can be; that, accordingly, such a doubt does not bear the same relation to the idea of lunacy. [*CR*, p. 447]

Living one's skepticism Doubts concerning other minds might not be best expressed as a vision in which I am alone in the world – in a sense that there are no human shapes around me. Rather, these doubts can be better expressed in the realization that the beings around me that look like humans do not act like humans (or in a way

38 Cavell comments here on Wittgenstein's question 'But, if you are *certain*, isn't it that you are shutting your eyes in face of doubt' (*PI*, p. 224)? Wittgenstein answers 'They are shut,' and thereby proposes to replace the skeptic's vision of intellectual limitation with an image of human finitude. Again, certain things are not in doubt for a reasonable person (*der Vernünftige hat gewisse Zweifel nicht*). It is important to note that for Cavell the reasonable person can, however, be persuaded or pushed to have doubts. Cavell reflects on Wittgenstein's answer: 'his eyes are shut; he has not shut them. The implication is that the insinuated doubt is not *his*. But how not? If the philosopher *makes* them his, pries the lids up with instruments of doubt, does he not come upon human eyes?'

I would expect human beings to act). Thus, can I be sure that this being will treat me like a human being? Or they can be expressed in the realization that I *am* alone in the world, because there is no one there to understand me, my plight of mind: 'I cannot close my eyes to my doubts of others and their doubts and denials of me ... my position here is not one of a generalized *intellectual* shortcoming' (*CR*, p. 432).

When I doubt whether this is a table or not, I can be led back to the form of life and thus to a community of language-users, which will provide an answer. When I doubt whether this or that is a human being, what is at stake is the shape and form of the community. Thus, the problem is not so much an absence of 'any legitimate appeal to objective criteria when trying to decide what one is as a human being.'[39] The criteria for something being a table or something being a human are as objective as they can be. This is what we call a table, and this is what we call a human being. The following contrast might make clearer what is at stake in Cavell's distinction between knowing that *x* and acknowledging that you are a human being: calling this or that a table implies *appealing to* an existing community. This is what we do. Calling you, or being denied being called, a human being is to *create* a community by affiliation or rejection.[40]

Furthermore, the community in question is not this or that linguistic community held together by this or that specific use of language. Rather, it is the community of those who are fated to exist in language – and that is of those who can speak to us, who create visions of what it can mean to be us. It is the community of those with whom we converse and create in mutuality. To include you in the community of human beings means that I could see myself living like you, feeling like you (loving or hating you). I acknowledge that your way of life (your thoughts, feelings and actions) are possible visions and expressions of who I am, of what is in me, or of who I could become.

The flexibility and openness of what it could mean to be human is not a function of the plasticity of language as reference to criteria might imply. Rather, it is the fact that humanity needs creation that underlies the creativity of language. 'A creature complicated or burdened enough to possess language at all' is a creature in need of self-creation (*CR*, p. 140).

To overlook the possibility that I may not be seen as presenting an image of what it means to be human to you would be, indeed, foolish. History has shown that. As Cavell writes, 'there is no possibility of human relationship that has not been enacted. The worst has befallen, befalls everyday' (*CR*, p. 432). Instead of

39 Fleming, *State of Philosophy*, p. 120

40 Marie McGinn, like Fleming, thinks that the problem of other mind skepticism is one of criteria, which in turn depends on her view of Wittgensteinian criteria. She therefore concludes, 'The uncertainty that enters into our everyday human relationships bears no relationship to the doubts of the philosophical skeptic. While the latter have their basis in a misunderstanding that the forms of ordinary language invite, the former are an indication of how intricate our life together has become' (Marie McGinn, 'The Real Problem of Others: Cavell, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein on Skepticism of Other Minds,' *European Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (1998): 45–58, p. 55). This is hardly to square with what Cavell writes about Othello: 'What this man lacked was not certainty. He knew everything, but he could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it. He found out too much for his mind, not too little' (*DK*, p. 141).

overlooking this doubt we have to live it, acknowledge it, and thereby acknowledge our positions *vis-à-vis* each other.

This means first, in the case of other mind skepticism, to know that all I need is present. The other's presence is the best case. Here is for us to see a physiognomy to read, and this is enough. Nothing more is to be had and nothing more needs to be had. The aspect of an other's humanity is there to be read as much as the aspect of the duck is there in the duck-rabbit. Secondly, acknowledging our position *vis-à-vis* each other means that I know that I can try to avoid this best case. Her humanity dawns on me and I can suppress this dawning. I can avoid and restrict my relations with others (*CR*, p. 433). I can try all this; yet it can fail at any given moment, and her humanity is there for me to see. Third, it means that I know that the basis upon which I acknowledge the humanity of another is within me. The other can express herself; yet at any moment, *I can decide not* to read this expression. There is nothing in the other that will force my reaction to her. I have to settle my attitude *vis-à-vis* the other on the sole basis of my humanity and that means of what I perceive as human in myself.

Thus, my knowledge of another as a human being (understood as implying acts of identification and acknowledgment and mutuality) is '*exposed*' (*CR*, p. 432, italics added). This exposure has four different qualities: first, I need to expose myself to the reality of this exposure of knowledge; secondly, my knowledge is exposed to the mutuality of your knowledge; third, my knowledge is exposed to your self-expression; and fourth, my knowledge of you is exposed to your willingness and capacity to express yourself.[41] It is consequently not confinement of knowledge but this exposure of knowledge that troubles the other mind skeptic.

Cavell finds in these troubles a sense of *disappointment* with the fact that *this* is what it means to know another. Our actual attempts at knowing another (failed, and successful as they are) pale if compared to some ideal picture of harmony, transparency, and union (cf. *CR*, p. 440). This ideal picture may be the upper limit on humanity's way of knowing, about which Cavell talks in distinction to inhumanity as the lower limit (cf. *CR*, p. 434). The ordinary drama of knowing another unfolds itself in between the lower limit of the passage to inhumanity or dehumanization of the other, and the upper limit of the expectation for harmony and union in total transparency. I take it that in the theme of disappointment Cavell sees, again, the topic of separateness at the heart of the skeptical worry. Exposure to the other and the need for expression would be easier to live with, if our separateness were not substantial, could not lead either to tragedy, or to remarriage.[42]

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41 Conant is right, as Bruns admits, to criticize Bruns for thinking that Othello wants to possess Desdemona's self-experience – cf. James Conant, 'On Bruns on Cavell,' *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991): 616–34, and Gerald L. Bruns, 'Reply to Crewe and Conant,' *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991): 635–8. Nevertheless, getting into someone else's mind is part of the skeptical desire. Lear wants to possess Cordelia's thoughts, we might say.

42 As we will see in the next chapter, the fact of resistance is central for Cavell's vision of the social life. Élise Doménach writes about Cavell's community of ordinary interactions: 'Si ce type de communauté est d'emblée politique, c'est que s'exprimerent en elle les désaccords et les conflicts' (Doménach, 'Stanley Cavell: Les chemins de la reconnaissance,' in *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 96 (1998): 496–511, p. 500).

This disappointment with knowledge (cf. *CR*, p. 440) expresses itself in our way of knowing others, and, furthermore, leaves a trace in our relationship with others. The other will know my disappointment, and it will be thus part of what I have to know about myself. We are living our skepticism to the degree that we are unable or unwilling to accept our human condition of knowing. To the degree that we can identify with those who are affected by this unwillingness, can we then see the skeptic's unwillingness or incapacity as reflexive of our common humanity? As Cavell writes about Othello:

> I claim to see how his life figures mine, how mine has the making of his, that we bear an internal relation to one another; how my happiness depends upon living touched but not struck by his problems, or struck but not stricken; problems of trust and betrayal, of false isolation and false company, of desire and fear of both privacy and of union. [*CR*, p. 453]

Performing exposure

We can thus read the skeptic as performing a vision of humanity. In his words (and in their failure) he wishes to stand for humanity. The question now arises whether we can acknowledge his worries as worries that we can share. Cavell's readings of Shakespeare and his idea that we can and do live our skepticism with regard to other minds, make us see how these worries can be genuinely human worries: how the skeptic can be seen as standing for us. What the skeptic performs is a human fear of the burden of possessing language, the fact that it is inherited, shared in mutuality, and that language demands my 'subjection to the intelligible' (*IQO*, p. 124). *More specifically, the skeptical performance points to the fear of our exposure to language – which is necessary for us to have a self – and our exposure to each other – which is necessary for us to have language.*

Reading and writing under the conditions of exposure Emerson's writing is an alternative performance of self under the conditions of our lived skepticism. His writing both reveals its knowledge of these conditions and it is a performance for others in the sense that it is neither conventional nor private. Such a performance of self reveals myself and thus myself as standing for humanity to the gaze of others. In so doing, it calls on others to acknowledge this performance as a way of standing for humanity, and thus as standing for themselves. Besides claiming the humanity of the writer, the text also demands a revelation of the reader. It does this in such a way that the reader realizes how and why he or she is relevant to the text.

The relevance of the reader in Cavell's interpretation of Emerson is to 'find thinking' in a text. This would be a thinking 'that confronts' the reader and that would in turn 'prove that there is (a) human existence authored in it' (*IQO*, p. 118). If the reader does not find such thinking in a text, then the existence authored in it remains unexpressed. To describe this state of an author's unexpressed existence, Cavell talks about the writer being 'incarcerated,' 'fettered,' or 'immured' by his words (cf. *IQO*, pp. 123, 124).

Writing about Poe, Cavell extends this imagery to 'penning':

> The writer does not speak of being in fetters, and in a cell, but he does name his activity as penning; since the activity at hand is autobiography, he is penning himself. Is this release or incarceration? He enforces the question by going on to say that he will not expound – that is he will not remove something (presumably himself) from a pound or pen. But this may mean that he awaits expounding by the reader. Would this be shifting the burden of his existence onto some other? And who might we be to bear such a burden? [*IQO*, p. 126][43]

In penning herself, the writer performs her self-expression with and in *these* words and not others. Whoever searched for words to express how it is with herself or whoever felt the need to confess knows the fragility and necessity of this exercise. Yet at the same time, these words communicate more 'than you know you say ... which means in part that you do not know in the moment the extent to which your saying is quoting,' thus implying that the extent to which these words are proofs for the writer's humanity remains unknown (*IQO*, p. 116). It also means in part that the writer does not know in the moment the extent to which her communication is effective and what kind of humanity she expresses, how she is heard and into which corner she pens herself.

This fragility of communication is partly due to the 'perverseness of language,' that is, that language *can* be seen as 'working without, even against, our thought and its autonomy' (*IQO*, p. 125). Whereas Hamlet and his father have untellable stories to tell, which are thus haunting in their presence of something absent, the perverseness of language enables stories without a teller, haunting in their absence of voice. The very possibility that language can be seen as voiceless enables the reader to judge a certain string of words as expressive of nothing. What counts as expressing something as being something, is not established *a priori* by virtue of a set of rules. Rather, it is

> ... I, some I or other, who counts, who is able to do the thing of counting, of conceiving a world, ... it is I who, taking others into account, establish criteria for what is worth saying, hence for the intelligible. But this is only on the condition that I count, that I matter, that it matters that I count in my agreement or attunement with those with whom I maintain my language, from whom this inheritance – language as the condition of counting – comes, so that it matters not only what some I or other says but that it is some particular I who desires in some specific place to say it. If my counting fails to matter, I am mad. It is being uncounted – being left out, as if my story were untellable – that makes what I say (seem) perverse, that makes me odd. The surmise that we have become unable to count one

43 Cavell addresses these questions in this passage: 'The emphasis on the question "to be or not" seems not on whether to die but on whether to be born, on whether to affirm or deny the fact of natality, as a way of enacting, or not, one's existence. To accept birth is to participate in a world of revenge, of mutual victimization, of shifting and substitution. But to refuse to partake in it is to poison everyone who touches you, as if taking your own revenge. This is why if the choice is unacceptable the cause is not metaphysics but history – say a posture toward the discovery that there is no getting even for the oddity of being born, hence of being and becoming the one poor creature it is given to you to be. The alternative to affirming this condition is, as Descartes, *Meditations* shows, world-consuming doubt, which is hence a standing threat to, or say, condition of, human existence' (*IQO*, p. 128).

> another, to count for one another, is philosophically a surmise that we have lost the capacity to think, that we are stupefied. I call this condition living our skepticism. [*IQO*, p. 127]

Thus, the writer has to write her text as a performance of self in such a way that it is clear that and how the reader matters. The reader, by the same token, has to read the text in such a way that it is clear that the voice of the writer matters, *and* to read in such a way that it becomes clear that she, the reader, matters.

In this way, I wish to interpret Cavell's rendering of the hermeneutical question as 'What does a text know?' or 'What is the genius of a text?'. The Emersonian–Cavellian text knows the 'whim,' that is, the particular vision of humanity that the author chooses for her expression of self; and in this vision the text knows also the reader as part of that humanity. We can see ourselves being known by such a text through recognizing our own rejected visions of humanity. Yet, this kind of text knows also that reader and writer can only know each other in mutuality, in attempts to become intelligible to each other. And the text knows that these attempts can fail.

If such an attempt to achieve mutual intelligibility succeeds, *this* reading of *this* text comes to an end. I can understand this text as an expression of your authentic self-creation or as *your* standing for humanity and as your way of standing for me. I know that I am read, convicted by your confession. At the same time, I know that it is my reading that enables your expression and your standing for humanity.

Emersonian philosophizing The task of philosophy (and of all writing and expressing ourselves) is therefore to perform our standing for humanity in such a way that another can find himself or herself in us. We *can* be complete enigmas to each other; yet we are called to express the fact that humanity is a species being, and to make ourselves intelligible (cf. *PI*, II, p. 233). Humanity as a species being is nevertheless dependent on both the individual expression of what it means to be human and the performance of authentic ways of living a human self. Human existence can only be proven and created as individual existence in aversion. This is the lesson learned from Emerson's interpretation of Descartes. Yet, Emerson's interpretation is expressed in the teaching about the expressive nature of language and in the vision of the body as the best picture of the human soul. Both foci (the need for individuality in order for there to be community, and the need for community in order for there to be individuality) are expressed in the following epigram: 'The Community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse of the individual dies away without the sympathy of the community' (*IQO*, p. 105).[44]

This quotation leads us now to two questions: first, what does enable the individual to express herself, and to acknowledge our exposure? And second, what is the role of the community in this project? Whereas the former question will lead to a discussion of Greta Garbo and the star, the latter will open up the long-due philosophical self-reflection on gender and community.

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44 Attributed to William James, Cavell uses these words as a motto for his 'Being Odd – Getting Even.'

Chapter 4

Beyond the Singing Body? Gender and Skepticism

A Community of Mutual Conversation

Creating the new woman/hu(man): a look ahead

The detailed exegesis of Cavell's philosophy of language and of the human as being burdened by language in the previous chapters showed how 'attunement' is the pivotal concept for Cavell's thought. Now the question arises how to understand this concept? How does attunement function, how is it achieved, threatened, or forgone? I take Cavell's writings on Hollywood Comedies of Remarriage and Hollywood melodramas to be philosophical explorations of this conceptual centerpiece of his work.[1] These 'extra-philosophical' topics are not exemplifications or applications of a philosophical concept. Rather, by interpreting movies Cavell explores what turned out to be a deep question in his work: what constitutes our being in tune with each other?

As mentioned already, Cavell is fascinated by what he calls the 'systematicity' of language, that is, the fact that we *can* so easily speak to each other – that we are, for the most part, in tune with each other's projection of words. This attunement is, however, not simply given. It is achieved by being worked out, threatened, and regained through acts of speaking in mutuality (and through acts of avoiding speaking to each other).

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1 Let me note also that this philosophical interest informs Cavell's choice of movies. Since remarriage seems to strike him as most aptly expressing the struggles of intimacy and separation, of the biological and cultural interconnection of desire, these particular Hollywood films present a fortuitous choice for Cavell. In line with his own interpretative stance ('how it strikes him') he does not use the fact that these movies were produced in a period of cultural renegotiations of gender roles in American society. For the impact on the Depression, for example, on normative heterosexuality, cf. George Chauncey, *Gay New York. Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p. 353f. Cavell is not primarily interested in the historical location of this negotiation (what prompted it). Yet, he explicitly acknowledges this location in the preface for his *Pursuits of Happiness*, for example. Cavell reads the movies as expressing a cultural situation in which Americans negotiated the consciousness that women hold of themselves in the face of male images of women. This negotiation is for him a struggle for mutual freedom. Beyond and in this particular struggle Cavell can envision marriage, society, and the community of human language users (humanity) as the act of negotiation.

By attuning ourselves to a shared language community we are also delineating the contours of what can humanly be said and of what constitutes humanity for 'us.' In each act of speech we present to one another facets of visions of shared humanity. Each act of speech involves standing for humanity and standing for each other. In speaking we create humanity. This was the Emersonian lesson of speaking and writing that we encountered in the last chapter.

What does that mean for the questions of gender in philosophy's self-examination? What are the therapeutic consequences for the core-complex of skepticism? Let us recall that the skeptical problem is not one of 'knowing' alone but rather one of how the skeptic can expose himself to the bodily knowledge of others. Thus, any philosophical therapy has to open up new possibilities of being human for the skeptic. Having closed himself off of the responsiveness and responsibility of a self originating in and being exposed to desiring bodies and of that which is beyond his control, the skeptic has to open himself to a new vision of self and of humanity.

In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell analyzes what he calls the genre of the 'Hollywood Comedies of Remarriage' as the cultural place of this creation of a new vision of the human.[2] Cavell writes, 'the subject of the genre of remarriage is well described as the creation of the woman, or of the new woman, or the new creation of the human' (*POH*, p. 140).[3] In these comedies we encounter new forms of 'standing for humanity,' forms and visions that allow for desire, bodily exposure, and the beyond. Since philosophy's task is to 'stand for the human,' the creation of the human in the image of the created woman in these films presents us with a philosophical alternative. It is an alternative to the violence of the evasion of the human in the violent thought of the skeptic (the creation of the non-human human as we might say). Yet, how can *this* new kind of standing for the human and this new kind of philosophy be learned or taught? Cavell writes at the beginning of *A Pitch of Philosophy* that an education for philosophy will prepare us for the acknowledgement 'that we live lives simultaneously of absolute separateness and endless commonness, of banality and sublimity.'[4]

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2 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) (Henceforth *POH*).

3 In his reading of *His Girl Friday*, Cavell writes, 'There is the early, summary declaration that this woman has been recently created, and created by this man' *(POH*, 167).

4 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy. Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. vii (Henceforth *PITCH*). Two moments in this book can serve as an overture to the topic of education. First, Cavell notices the shame his father felt for being a pawn-shop owner (*ibid*., 31). In 'Being Odd – Getting Even,' Cavell writes that in order to overcome our shame of being exposed to each other, we have to become ashamed of it. It is shame of our posture of shame that overcomes the fear of exposure. This implies that self-awareness is an important element in education for philosophy. We have to acknowledge that this is our posture. Second, recounting how at age 16 he changed his name from the 'given name Goldstein to the alias Cavell,' he tells how his father came across the name 'Cavalier.' Cavalier – or Cavelierskii – was the family name before an US immigration official named them 'Goldstein.' Cavell writes, 'In my later ecstatic improvisation, erasing and transfiguring my identity, I took the first two syllables as more fittingly reticent than, and again, different from, the first three ... I have from then on taken it as an obligation with each

I will read Cavell's work on these Hollywood comedies as an instance of this education for doing philosophy. On the one hand, the philosophers can learn with the help of the comedies what the creation of a human being through mutuality involves. Most importantly, this creation in mutuality (of humanity by humanity) is a creation not in the image of perfection but in the image of imperfection. On the other hand, this education is addressed to the philosopher male in his inability to be in a relationship characterized simultaneously by separateness and commonality. This education, however, brings into further relief the conundrum of the gendered nature of the problem of skepticism. While the new man is created in the image of the woman, it is still a new *man* who is created through the educational films.

The present chapter then sets the stage for an exploration of the lines that tie together the 'the feminine,' 'absence,' 'the transcendent,' and 'the beyond.' And we will see how these ties entangle women, making them both victims of and saviors for the skeptical complex. An analysis of this entanglement thus opens philosophy's self-reflection up for a dialogue with that which is 'beyond' philosophy, namely with that within in 'our' humanity which is beyond 'our' control.

First, however, we have to take a look at how Cavell envisions the creation of the new woman or of the new hu(man). To this end, I will discuss Cavell's work on the Hollywood Comedies of Remarriage as philosophy of attunement. Through speaking together, the leading man and the leading lady create a new tune for humanity, thus changing the visions of what it means to be human. Central for this new tune is acknowledging our separateness. Such an acknowledgment (like the attunement which it enables) is not simply 'given' but is achieved through a process of maturation. The woman (the old human) has to let go of a desire for unqualified unity and has to embrace the fragility of being separate and being created in separateness:

> What is wanting – if marriage is to be reconceived, or let's say human attraction – is for the other to see our separate existence, to acknowledge its separateness, a reasonable condition for a ceremony of union. Then the opening knowledge of the human is conceived as the experience of being unknown. To reach that absence is not the work of a moment. [*CT*, p. 22]

Remarriage is an action taken when unions based on natural bonds or on strictly legal constructs have failed; and remarriage is the vision for a society based on speaking to and for each other. Needless to say, not all attempts to talk together end in remarriage. What happens to women who are trapped in places where there is no society or no marital community to welcome their words? What about the risk that women will remain ultimately 'unknown' in their humanity? The last section of this

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new acquaintance to let my origins show – not of course as if they were in doubt or as if they mattered to the other' (p. 29). I mention this story here, because it stresses the importance of origins and history in our formation of new ways of being ourselves. Simply taking up the 'old' name would not help the project of 'erasing' and transfiguring the past; yet not just any name could count as showing the origins, and hence as a way of making this past present in its erased and transfigured way. A note to 'erasing': I understand this like the erasing of a painter. The traces of the erased paintings remain.

chapter will address and discuss Cavell's reflections on these questions in *Contesting Tears*, his book on the genre of the Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman. This discussion will finally allow us to see in full light the structural problems with Cavell's symbolism of gender – problems not only for his own philosophical project, and for the issue of philosophy's self-reflection, but also for the wider polity.

Let us now turn to speaking in new tunes, and first to the importance of acknowledging separateness – an acknowledgement about which the skeptic has to learn by gazing at his alter ego. After discussing separation and its anxieties we shall arrive at the question of who is active and who is passive in this picture of the 'creation of the new woman.'

Feeding and separation anxiety

Acknowledging separateness is the first task of the leading couple in the genre of films Cavell calls 'Hollywood Comedies of Remarriage.' They have to overcome a primordial or seemingly natural affinity (a prior one-ness) in order to achieve a life of happy separateness and ongoing mutual conversation (*POH*, p. 103). This obstacle of natural affinity is presented through the imagery of a shared childhood where the couple lived like brother and sister. In *The Philadelphia Story* the leading couple was said to have been growing up together, or in *The Lady Eve* the man tells his partner that he feels he had known her all his life. In *Bringing Up Baby* the couple is presented as becoming children together, again. And Cavell interprets the game of playing house in *It Happened One Night* as expressing this trope of natural affinity (cf. *POH*, pp. 60, 103). Cavell summarizes this point in the following way:

> The intimacy conditional on narcissism or incestuousness must be ruptured in order that an intimacy of difference or reciprocity supervene. Marriage is always divorce, always involves rupture from something; and since divorce is never final, marriage is always transgression. (Hence marriage is the central social image of human change, showing why it is and is not metamorphosis.) [*POH*, p. 103]

The previous chapters helped us to see how Cavell's philosophy of language and his philosophy of possessing language stresses the inescapable connection of human life. Now we have to investigate more deeply the sense of an inescapable separateness that undergirds our human condition. The thrust of Cavell's interpretation of the theme of divorce and remarriage is that in order to consummate sexual desires we have to face the (awful) truth of our separateness. *Thus, I understand Cavell as claiming that fear of the replacement of intimacy based on sameness (be it narcissistic or incestuous) with intimacy based on intercourse (be it verbal or bodily) lies at the heart of 'our' separation anxiety*.

This separation anxiety, however, illuminates more than just our marital relationship. Separation, according to Cavell, is at the heart of the 'founding trauma of human experience,' a trauma whose denial or protection begets philosophical skepticism.[5]

5 The full quotation reads: 'We seem to have a hint here about why opera so attunes itself to moments of separation, as if this is the founding trauma of human experience. If

Let us turn now from Cavell's treatment of gender, separation, and intimacy in 'Hollywood Comedies of Remarriage' to his treatment of food exchange in *It Happened One Night*. Here we will encounter deeply theological themes and we will be left with the somewhat surprising question of who creates women in Cavell's universe.

Food of the father and food of the husband In *It Happened One Night*, Cavell sees a close link between issues of intimacy and the symbolism of feeding and hunger (*POH*, pp. 91, 95). Ellie's emancipation from her father is staged as an angry refusal to be fed by him, and Peter's struggle to win her revolves around having her accept his humble food: 'The angry refusal of food is thus directly established as an angry, intimate refusal of love, of parental protection; the appreciative acceptance of food in the auto camp cabin asserts itself as the acceptance of that intimacy' (*POH*, p. 91).

There are, however, important differences between the food (and love) left behind and the food (and love) newly accepted by Ellie. The way in which Peter or Ellie's father, Captain Andrews, provides food reveals those differences and similarities between parental and erotic love.

Maternal cooking and paternal providing Cavell describes Clark Gable's Peter as so good at being parental 'that you don't know whether to consider that the paternal or the maternal side of his character predominates. One would like to say, in view of the representations he has made to be married to her, that he is being a husband who understands that role as a classical commitment to being both father and mother to the woman' (*POH*, p. 90). It is the nurturing side of Gable's character (the fact that he *cooks* breakfast for Ellie and presses her dress) which brings out the *maternal* parental side in him.

Ellie's father is not depicted as cooking for her. He provides her with food already cooked; yet he 'even tries to feed her' (*POH*, p. 91). As a father, Andrews controls Ellie's food. He provides but does not prepare it.[6]

Peter, on the other hand, both prepares maternally and he provides and controls food paternally. At one point he sends a box of chocolate away that Ellie had just ordered: 'He explains this husbandly act by saying that she can't afford chocolates and telling her that from now on she is on a budget; but the implication is clear enough that he is instructing her not merely in what is worth spending but in what is worth eating, say in what is worth consummation' (*ibid.*).

Limitation and food The fantastic luxury in which Ellie had been brought up, and more specifically the endless supply of fine food (symbolized by the box of chocolates) stand for a primordial freedom from want. The food Captain Andrews

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we conceive that singing, in its breaths, incessantly draws in and lets out the world as such, are we not conceiving that there is no world-changing creation that is not a consequence of destruction?' (*Pitch*, p. 148).

6 Cavell points to Margaret Mead's and Lévi-Strauss's work to introduce the symbolic opposition between the masculine capacity to provide food and the feminine capacity to prepare it (*POH*, p. 94).

provides is endless and refined; there is no room for any form of culinary need. The food of the father echoes the pre-oedipal fantasy of limitless symbiotic omnipotence. In these movies the pre-oedipal fantasy of symbiosis is played out with the help of the father. One explanation could be the fact that, according to Cavell, the genre of the comedy of remarriage demands the absence of the leading lady's mother. Or we could point to the following observation of Freud:

> The phase of exclusive attachment to the mother, which may be called the pre-Oedipal phase, possesses a far greater importance in women than it can have in men ... Long ago we noticed that many women who have chosen their husband on the model of their father, or have put him in their father's place, nevertheless repeat toward him, in their married life, their bad relations with their mother.[7]

This Freudian reference underscores the intuition that the absence of the mother leads to a masculine playing field in which the 'human' separation anxiety is played out. At another point, Cavell notes that the absence of the mother, the striking beauty of the father, and the absence of children for the leading woman in the comedies, seems to signal the following: 'The woman had been abandoned, so far, to the world of men' (*CT*, p. 86). Her abandonment to the world of men in the movies raises the question whether men are the principle actors in the drama of 'attunement' that the comedies are to explore. Again, I want to flag the question of the role of gender-asymmetry in these crucial writings of Cavell. Let us now return to the trope of limitation.

Captain Andrews' food was unlimited and refined. Peter, on the other hand, provides not chocolates but carrots. Thus, in her journey to Peter, Ellie makes the transition to a form of intimacy which is budgeted and neither endless nor without boundaries. The intimacy Peter offers can be depleted and needs to be managed. The world to which he introduces her is one in which woman can and do faint because of hunger.[8] In order to enter Peter's world, and to consummate Peter's love, Ellie has to separate herself from the world of limitless resources and with it of pre-oedipal (that is, boundary-less) intimacy. Cavell reads this separation as an acknowledgment of the human condition: 'Eating the carrot is the expression [of] her acceptance of her humanity, of true need – call it the creation of herself as a human being' (*POH*, p. 93).

Food and creation: who is creating? Cavell writes here that she is creating herself as a human being. She is active. This is somewhat at odds with this continuous insistence that in the Comedies of Remarriage the woman accepts being created by the man (being passive): 'There is the early, summary declaration that this woman has been recently created, and created by this man' (*POH*, p. 167). It strikes me as more apt to say that Ellie, in accepting Peter's food, allows herself to be created by

7 Sigmund Freud, 'Female Sexuality,' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. J. Strachey, Volume 21 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), pp. 230f.

8 Cavell describes as a 'Depression vignette' a scene where a mother on the bus faints from hunger *(POH*, p. 96).

Peter. Thus, accepting her human condition means that Ellie acknowledges that she is in need of 'creation.'

We can only understand the full force of the topic of 'creation' if we remember what Cavell said in his readings of Emerson about humanity's need for self-creation. We have to author ourselves and create ourselves from conformity to a life of thinking and speaking for ourselves.[9] Yet, as authors of our own thoughts we are also in need of readers who 'find thinking' in our texts, in our bodies, or lives. We are in need of readers who acknowledge our humanity, and who, in so doing, release our existence. Let me note, however, that Cavell raises in this context the following question: 'Would this be shifting the burden of his existence onto some other? And who might we be to bear such a burden' ('Odd,' p. 126)? In the light of this connection the question of how to parse activity and passivity in the 'creation' of the woman in the Comedies becomes even more urgent. Can she find thinking in herself or for herself? Can she find it in true mutuality?

Let us now look closer at Cavell's way of connecting food and creation. To strengthen this connection Cavell turns to anthropology and he quotes Margaret Mead's observation that

> An Arapesh boy grows his wife. As a father's claim to his child is not that he has begotten it but rather that he has fed it, so also a man's claim to his wife's attention and devotion is not that he has paid a bride-prize for her, or that she is legally his property, but that he has actually contributed the food which has become flesh and bone of her body.[10]

Cavell mentions Mead to show that Peter provides his food *both as husband and father*. Both father and husband create the woman through their providing of food. They feed her into being the woman that she becomes. Peter's masculinity implies both functions. But whereas Captain Andrews' food is the food of limitless sustenance, Peter's food is the food of economy and limitation. *Thus, by allowing herself to be created through Peter's feeding, Ellie trades a creator representing infinity for a creator representing limitation. By separating herself from her father, Ellie accepts that she is in need of creation and she accepts that this need be fulfilled by a limited man. She therefore is an image of what is at stake in the post-Cartesian world, a world in which an omnipotent God does not guarantee our existence as humans. In this world we have to accept that it is our task to author humanity. Ellie agrees to be authored not by an omni-potent God but by a failing and limited human being.*

I wish to interpret the core of the fear of separation therefore as a fear of dependency, and more specifically, dependency on a finite other who becomes the creator – or at least co-creator – of my being. It is interesting to note that Cavell does not discuss explicitly the role of the father as creator. However, if Margaret Mead's observation was meant to stress the continuity in the husbandly and fatherly creation of the woman, the question becomes what distinguishes her father's and Peter's creation of Ellie.

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9 Self-creation begins with 'an uncreated human being and the power of thinking' (*IQO*, p. 111).

10 Cavell found this passage in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 487, quoted in *POH*, p. 94.

I located this distinction in the roles of abundance and limitation, to which Cavell's discussion of food points. This location strengthens the general thrust of Cavell's reading in which 'acknowledging imperfection,' 'acknowledging being human,' and 'acknowledging the need to be created' flow into each other. Cavell paraphrases, for example, Dexter's main teaching to his partner Tracy in *The Philadelphia Story* as follows: 'You'll never be a first-class person or a first-class woman until you ... do something like accept human imperfection, frailty, in others and hence in yourself' (*POH*, p. 148).

To imagine her lover as an all-giving fatherly creator without limitations would be a form of psychological incest in which true need could not be realized. Cavell points as a matter of fact to Freud's impression that in a first marriage the husband is oftentimes only a substitute for the love of the father (cf. *POH*, p. 149). To imagine herself as not needing creation, on the other hand, would be a form of narcissism where no relationship could be realized.

According to Cavell, a sense of transience and incompleteness accompanies the awareness of our separateness reflecting the realization that we are in need of being created. More specifically, we need another finite human being as the instrument of our creation. According to this analysis, the skeptic has to learn that we can only become who we are with the help of, and in connection with, another human being. Surprisingly, Cavell discusses 'creation' in a gendered fashion. The main focus of the comedies is the creation of the woman. She seems to be the gender that has to learn to accept separateness. While this might make sense (despite its problematic societal consequences) in a Freudian framework, where the father-presence threatens and opens up the mother–child symbiosis, such a gendering seems to run counter to Cavell's earlier discussions of skepticism. Here it was the male's incapacity to be known by the woman that represented the skeptical worry. How can the separation of the woman be an answer to a problem that seemed to be male? And given this gendering of the skeptical problem, how can we still maintain that the skeptic is expressing a genuine human worry and not just a male worry?

As I already pointed out, Cavell mentions what he calls the traumatic question about the 'possibility that philosophical skepticism is inflected, if not altogether determined by gender, by whether one sets oneself aside as masculine or feminine. And if philosophical skepticism is thus inflected then, according to me, philosophy as such will be' (*CT*, p. 100).

However, it is not clear from his writing how he answers this traumatic question. At times he states that skepticism is a 'male affair' (*Pitch*, p. 169); yet at other times he writes that skepticism is a human problem (*CT*, p. 94). To answer these questions about gender and skepticism, we must examine more closely Cavell's treatment of agency and passivity.

Activity and passivity in the creation of the woman

As we have seen, there is clear evidence that Cavell is saying that the creation of the woman in the comedies is a male affair (*POH*, p. 57), so much so that in the comedies even the pre-oedipal symbiosis is played out with a male. On the other hand, as we have likewise seen, Cavell writes that Ellie creates herself as a new woman.

An instance of the ambiguous relationship between the activity and passivity of the woman is the following description of Walter and Hildy in *His Girl Friday*:

> I mention several features of their intimacy which this film picks up quite unmodified from the laws of the genre of remarriage. There is the early, summary declaration that this woman has recently been created, and created by this man. What he created her from is a 'doll-faced hick,' which thus satisfies the law that they knew one another in childhood, anyway in a life before their shared adulthood. And what he created out of her was a newspaperman. This creation accordingly hinges with the further feature in which accepted differences between the genders are made into problems, several related ones. The conventional distribution of physical vanity, first of all, is reversed. Our opening glimpse of Walter is of him primping, and soon he will be giving himself a flower to wear, as though dressing for battle. It takes a while for Hildy's comparative casualness about her looks to reveal itself ... The question which of them is the active and which the passive partner is treated at the close of their initial interview as a gag, as in *Bringing Up Baby*, about who is following whom, or about who should be. In *His Girl Friday* it takes the form of issues about who is to go first down the aisle through the city room and about who is to hold the door and a gate open for whom. [*POH*, p. 168]

We can learn more about the issue of activity and passivity in the creation of the woman by looking at what Cavell says about the role of the camera and the audience. In 'Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly,' Cavell describes as an essential aim of the comedies that they exploit 'film's power of metamorphosis or transfiguration.' In these films this power is 'expressed as the woman's suffering creation, which cinematically means the transformation of flesh-and-blood women into projections of themselves on a screen. Hence the obligation in those films to find some narrative occasion for revealing ... the woman's body, the body of *that* actress' (*CT*, p. 122).

The creative gaze and the camera Cavell follows here an insight from his earlier *The World Viewed*. He had argued that whereas the actor on a stage disappears behind the character he or she plays, the camera makes the actor on screen into a star (cf. *WV*, p. 33, 175). The camera emphasizes the physical presence as a photographic presence of the actor, an emphasis that demands the display or suggestion of the woman's naked body:

> Thus does film, in the genre under consideration, declare its participation in the creation of the woman, a declaration that its appetite for presenting a certain kind of woman a certain way on the screen – its power, or its fate, to determine what becomes of these women on film – is what permits the realization of these narratives' structures as among the highest achievements in the art of film. [*POH*, p. 140]

In the next paragraph, Cavell writes how in *The Philadelphia Story* the thematic question of whether this woman is made of flesh and blood or whether she is a (distant) goddess, is inflected formally by the camera. The camera studies Katharine Hepburn's body – preferably in water, for example, when she produces a trained dive into the swimming pool. I refer to these passages because they present us with the

idea that the creation of the woman through the camera is a technical version of the creation of the woman through the male gaze.[11]

Let me explore this thesis with the help of three points. First, the camera exposes 'naturally' the 'feminine aspect of the masculine physiognomy (and though I am for some reason more hesitant about this, the masculine aspect of the feminine)' (*POH*, p. 224). Cavell links the intuition that the camera reveals the opposite sexual nature of its human subjects with the following two ideas. On the one hand, the camera reveals 'an otherwise invisible self' (*ibid.*). The camera with its focus on human bodily expression can present us with images of the potentials of the human self that are not usually seen, or not open to the 'normal view.' The distinctions of societal order (in clothes, reputations, etc.) are not relevant for the eye of the camera: 'It is this property of film that allows, say, Fellini to discover in the face of a contemporary Roman butcher the visage of an ancient Emperor' (*POH*, p. 158). On the other hand, the luminosity of the objects presented to the camera, points to an 'inherent self-reflexiveness or self-referentiality of objects filmed' (*POH*, p. 224). The objects participate in their representation: the camera is not completely in control of the creative act. The presence of those objects on the screen refers, for Cavell, to their absence. Thus, this presence points to the possibility that in the presentation of human beings on screen we are also confronted with what is absent or invisible in their gendered desire – something like the 'other side' of each gender.[12]

Secondly, the gaze of the cameras should not be seen as fixed. Cavell produces a list of powerful gazes of women on screen transforming men on screen with their looks. He ends this list with 'Mae West delivering her line running, "Come up and see me" – precisely unimaginable, I take it, as an offer to be gazed at dominatingly' (*CT*, p. 124). Cavell invites us to imagine that these women are empowered to 'instruct the camera in its ways of looking – to, say, the extent that men can be instructed' (*CT*, 125). Finally, it is not clear whether the gaze of the camera presents a point of view of a male or female director. Some of the films present one partner in the leading pair as surrogate director: 'In *Lady Eve* it is the woman who directs the action (as it is in *Bringing Up Baby*); the man is her audience, gulled and entranced as a film audience is apt to be. In *It Happened One Night* it is the man who directs, and the woman is not so much his audience as his star' (*POH*, p. 107). Thus, in these reflections on the gaze of the camera we encounter, again, the theme of mutuality and of the creation of humanity.

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11 In 'Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly,' Cavell distinguishes between the 'appropriative, unreciprocated gaze of men,' and the creative and reciprocating gazes of the men in the Comedies of Remarriage (*CT*, p. 123). The fact that whereas Claudette Colbert shows her leg, Clark Gable removes his shirt, to my mind, rather stresses the rarity of the camera's inquisitive interest in the male body. After all, these are films primarily (!) about the creation of the woman.

12 'The reflexiveness of objects harks back, in my mind, to the earlier claim in *The World Viewed* that objects on a screen appear as held in the frame of nature, implying the world as a whole. The sexual reflexiveness of human beings would accordingly suggest the individual as expressing humanity as such, what in *The Claim of Reason* I call the internal relation of each human being with all others' (*POH*, p. 225).

The creative and victimized audience At times, the perspective of the camera mirrors, furthermore, the perspective of the audience. This is how Cavell discusses the 'barrier,' that is, a blanket, separating the sleeping arrangements of Peter and Ellie in the auto camp in *It Happened One Night*:

> That the barrier works like a movie screen means that our position as audience is to be read in terms of the man and the woman's position with each other, and especially in terms of the man's, for it is with him that we first watch the screen take on the characteristic of a movie screen, and his problem of putting together a real woman with a projected image of her seems a way of describing our business as viewers. [*POH*, p. 105]

Our position as audience in the films of this genre in general is well captured by this prescription to put together 'a real woman with a projected image of a woman.' As audience, our task is to read the images on film in such a way that we can be struck by them as we would be by an encounter with a real woman. This task demands from us the spiritual task of uniting 'two versions of her' (*POH*, p. 106). One version is the woman of our dreams or the woman of *our imagination*; the other is the woman in her individuality and in *her body* with its idiosyncrasies. Confronted with the task of putting together the woman, the audience is depicted as male and as actively creating.

At another place, however, Cavell talks about the experience of viewing film as an experience of victimization. Let me quote this passage in its entirety:

> Victimization constitutes an interpretation of the passiveness of viewing. In 'On Makavejev On Bergman' I propose that recent films of Bergman and of Makavejev show how the action of what is exhibited by projecting images on a screen may be treated mythologically as what Nietzsche calls, in *The Gay Science*, action at a distance, which is his interpretation of a man's reaction to women (or, as I suppose, of the relation of the masculine to the feminine side of human character). This proposes a mythology, in a word, of the seductiveness of film; of art, therefore, to the extent that film is art. Bergman and Makavejev understand the screen, according to this way of thinking, as reflecting for us a way of considering things that presented in themselves would turn us to stone. Call these things elements in our horror of our sexuality, of our existence with others in the world. The point of the myth is that our condition as passive, as victim, might damn or might save us, might darken or illuminate us, depending on whether we are impassive or receptive to the experience offered us, closed or open to it. I want the idea of receptiveness here to hark back to the mark that Heidegger, and I have claimed Emerson before him, requires of genuine thinking. [*POH*, p. 184f]

Let me flag the problematic equation of the relation between the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' side of the human character with the relation between a man's reactions to a woman. We will discuss Cavell's oscillating between gender as symbolism ('masculine side of the human character') and gender as political reality ('what a man wants from a woman'). Here I want to highlight however that in this Nietzschean mythology, film as art is seductive and requires a passive audience. Moreover, film is presented as a seductive and soothing presence of a woman who is longed for by a distant male. 'The screen acts as a woman acts,' writes Cavell in the original piece

on Makavejev.[13] Let me quote, again in full, the related passage in Nietzsche's *Gay Science*:

> When a man stands in the midst of his own noise, in the midst of his own surf of plans and projects, then he is apt also to see quiet, magical beings gliding past him and to long for their happiness and seclusion: *women*. He almost thinks that his better self dwells there among the women, and that in these quiet regions even the loudest surf turns into deathly quiet, and life itself into a dream about life. Yet! Yet! Noble enthusiast, even on the most beautiful sailboat there is a lot of noise, and unfortunately much small and petty noise. The magic and the most powerful effect of women is, in philosophical language, action at a distance, *actio in distans*; but this requires first of all and above all – *distance*. [§ 60, Quoted in: *TOS*, p. 138]

Now, it is important to note that Cavell talks about a seductiveness that is inherent in the medium of film in general, and not only about a feature related to a specific film in a specific genre. This is a seductiveness linked to film's capacity to make something absent present. Film is capable of producing this form of distance in which something makes its presence felt only through its absence. Furthermore, both Bergman's and Makaveyev's films, which are the center of Cavell's discussion, deal with the question of female identity (*TOS*, p. 136). Thus, in these passages we see the male audience as rapt and passive before the active and seductive powers of the female film.

What now emerges through my interpretation is an ambivalent picture in Cavell's work, a picture in which women are created and creative while the male audience is both active and passive. The male camera-gaze is both actively creating and passively learning, and the action of the movies is sometimes directed by women and sometimes by men. Again, I will refrain here from a fuller critique of this picture. Before I can critique Cavell's use of gender we have to trace more fully the role gender plays in his thought about society and the community of language users. We have to better understand how Cavell uses 'the masculine' or 'the feminine.'

The 'feminine man'

This ambivalence of agency is echoed by 'role-reversal' and the appearance of the 'feminine man' in the Comedies of Remarriage (*CT*, p. 186). We see Cary Grant wearing a negligee and Spencer Tracy dressed in an apron. We have already encountered the role reversal in *His Girl Friday* and the maternal parenthood of Peter in *It Happened One Night*.[14] In *The Awful Truth*, Jerry has to resign himself into Lucy's hands and the resolution of the film is achieved while Grant is dressed in a 'quasi-feminine get-up' (*POH*, p. 256). Cavell calls this get-up a 'mild indignity' for Grant (*ibid.*). In his reflections on *Adam's Rib*, Cavell links this with other instances

13 Stanley Cavell, 'On Makavejev on Bergman,' in Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School. Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1988), pp. 106–40, p. 137.

14 *Bringing Up Baby* is 'somewhat special,' because in it the male character is educated to free his sexual desires (cf. *CT*, p. 186).

of indignities that the man has to endure according to the laws of the genre: 'the air goes out of Gable's tire; Grant's being dressed in a negligee or covered with feathers; Fonda's repeated fallings; Tracy's dizziness and stuttering in court' (*POH*, p. 197). Cavell writes that the man's capacity to endure those 'indignities,' without losing his sense of self-worth gives him authority to lecture the woman, that is, 'to be chosen by her for her instruction. Call it his ability to learn, to suffer change. In showing that he allows, and survives, the going out of his ego, this ability proves his potency' (*ibid.*). At another place, Cavell interprets these reversals and humiliations as 'a containment of sadism ("the taint of villainy") in which it is altogether essential, for example, to have a shared sense, as in *Adam's Rib*, of "the difference between a slap and a slug"' (*CT*, p. 186).

According to Cavell this taint of villainy points to the broader claim of the Comedies, which see maleness itself as sadistic and violent (*CT*, p. 84). This claim echoes the Freudian concept of sadistic and active males as opposed to passive and masochistic females.[15] The consequence that Cavell draws is that marriage in these comedies is always threatened by this violent and sadistic male trait:

> Then the happiness in even these immensely privileged marriages exists only so far as the pair together locate and contain this taint – you may say domesticate it, make a home for it – as if the task of marriage is to overcome the villainy of marriage itself. Remarriage comedies show the task to be unending and the interest in the task to be unending. [*CT*, p. 85]

In the theme of male violence and villainy we revisit our discussion of Othello in the previous chapter. Othello could not bear to be successful in his violent knowing of Desdemona, because this would imply that she knew him, too.[16] And we revisit the topic of sacrifice. The couples *share* responsibility to domesticate the male's violence. This happens in the Othello case through the sacrifice of romance, which is the sacrifice of her intactness:

> Her virginity, her intactness, her perfection, had been gladly forgone by her for him, for the sake of their union, for the seaming of it. It is the sacrifice he could not accept, for then he was not himself perfect. It must be displaced. The scar is the mark of finitude, of separateness; it must be borne whatever one's anatomical condition, or color. [*DK*, p. 137]

In the Othello-case, it was the male who needed education to acknowledge separation and imperfection; and Othello refused the willingly offered education on Desdemona's body. But in the case of the Comedies the woman needs education to acknowledge her imperfection and separation. This education proceeds with the help of a man who presents imperfection and finitude on his body (in, for example, female clothes), that is, a man with domesticated violence. Without such a man, the

15 Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell. Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, p. 333.

16 'The violence in masculine knowing, explicitly associated with jealousy, seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession, call it private property. Othello's problem, following my suggestion that his problem is over success, not failure, is that Desdemona's acceptance, or satisfaction, or reward, of his ambition strikes him as being possessed, as if he were the woman' (*DK*, p. 10).

woman cannot bear the 'mark of finitude' and become human – according to Cavell's reading of the Comedies. The male educator has to reveal his own limitations like Walter who declares in *His Girl Friday* 'that his own power is only mortal, without certainty, without insurance' (*POH*, p. 180). Such a man is needed for a woman's creation in Cavell's reading of things.

He expresses a similar idea with reference to Ibsen's *Dollhouse*. Nora leaves her husband in search of a man who is capable of providing her with an education:

> She leaves saying that he [Helmer Thorvald] is not the man to provide her with one, implying both that the education she requires is in the hands of men and that only a man capable of providing it, from whom it would be acceptable, could count for her as husband. Thinking of the woman of remarriage comedies as lucky to have found such a man, remarriage comedy studies, among other matters, what has made him, inescapably bearing masculine taint, acceptable. [*CT*, p. 85]

This idea prompts for Cavell the question of what happens to the women who cannot find such a man or cannot manage or relish a relationship with him. This idea, together with the previous discussion of male-and-femaleness, presses the question of the role of gender in Cavell's vision of skepticism and consequently philosophy. We are left to wonder whether the woman has to bear the burden of being the sacrificial solution for a male problem.

Before we can discuss this question fruitfully we have to understand better Cavell's concept of mutual conversation and his vision of the society in which this conversation happens or the one to which this conversation can lead. I will therefore end this section with a look at Cavell's understanding of society as based on our 'attunement.' While this excursus into Cavell's social philosophy might seem to digress from the question of gender, it in fact provides the basis for discussing the role of gender in the Cavellian construction of attunement and society. In the final section of this chapter, I will turn to the Melodramas of the Unknown Woman, a genre of films in which this 'attunement' is not achieved or fails. These considerations are the building blocks for a detailed discussion of the symbolism of gender that underlies Cavell's vision of philosophy as standing for the human.

Mutual conversation and a claim to community

Marriage and learning to speak to each other The domestication of male violence enables the woman to acknowledge her separateness and hence her need for creation, says Cavell. 'The implication is that the woman's creation will be completed, furthered, only with the man's,' writes Cavell (*CT*, p. 117). As yet, we have no idea how the male's education, his overcoming of his 'lingering villainy,' is going to come about. It is further unclear whether his violence is a consequence of maleness itself or of 'masculinity as it has been defined, or deformed, in our culture' (*CT*, p. 116). Again, Cavell presents us with a tantalizing idea about the role of gender. While he does not clear this point up we can detect in passages like this one Cavell's struggle with how to understand gender in our culture or polity and in philosophy.

What we do know, however, is that the creation and education of the woman in the comedies happens through conversation, 'where conversation means of course

talk, but means also an entire life of intimacy' (*ibid.*). Cavell characterizes the goal of this conversation, of the constant talking of the couples with each other, as 'learning to speak the same language' (*POH*, p. 88). This implies learning to gain the right attitude of distance and connection to each other, in short, of being in 'attunement' with each other. Talking together is their way of learning to be together and their being together is marked by conversation (*POH*, p. 146). Their 'attunement' in language is the product of these ongoing conversations. They show that the leading man and woman know one another. They speak because they risk being known and they dare (or learn to dare) exposing themselves to each other in their separateness. Let us recall, again, that the final scene in *The Awful Truth* is played out in nightgowns more revealing of nudity than concealing it.

Given that using a language is an appeal to community, as we have already seen, we can now understand these marital conversations as an appeal to a new community that does not yet exist but is there to be created by them. In this community the woman and the man can find their individual and separate voices and in so doing they can speak for one another in mutuality.

Cavell suggests that marriage is an emblem of this mutuality and of the 'knowledge of others not solely because of its implication of reciprocity but because it implies a devotion in repetition, to dailiness' (*POH*, pp. 241, 242). Thus, at one point Cavell describes the learning process of the couple as 'a matter of a new reception of your own experience, an acceptance of your authority as your own' (*POH*, p. 240). In other words they have to authorize their lives. We can connect this with the following tuition Cavell draws from Emerson and Thoreau: 'encouraged by them, one learns that without this trust in one's experience, expressed as willingness to find words for it, without thus taking an interest in it, one is without authority in one's own experience. (In a similar mood, in *The Claim of Reason*, I speak of being without a voice in one's own history)' (*POH*, p. 12).

In these conversations each partner has his or her specific role to play. Cavell seems at pains to maintain a strong image of separateness and to anchor this separateness in gender. The happiness of the pair in the comedies, therefore, depends on *her choice* of a man who is fit to educate her and

> ... on the condition that the man reciprocally craves the knowledge of (that is, by) the woman and in such a manner that the struggle between the sexes can play itself out without interruption (for example, by children, or by economic need), on the sublime level of difference mutually desired and comically overcome. [*CT*, p. 13]

These communications allow the pair to find their voices and hence to overcome the fear of inexpressiveness; they learn that they have to reveal themselves before each other and they have to learn to trust that the partner will understand. Peter could not accept right away the exposure of Ellie after he told her his dream and she professed her love for him. Part of the drama of the Comedies is the drama of timing. Both have to find the right moment to expose themselves and they have to prepare each other for that exposure. Thus, the pair has to live their exposure under conditions of uncertainty. It is certain that the world is not fashioned according to one's heart's desire, and that the community they appeal to and envision is only achieved through misunderstanding. There *is* no marriage and there is no 'attunement' without trusting (cf. *POH*, p. 232).

We can see this realism about the conditions of exposure likewise in Cavell's insistence that the bickering, the misunderstandings, and reconciliations shown in the films are not merely a *precondition* for marriage. This would assume that the conversation would stop and understanding would be guaranteed once the nuptial bond is legitimized. Rather, the conversation continues. 'What does a happy marriage *sound* like,' asks Cavell. He points to the 'sound of argument, of wrangling, of verbal battle' (*POH*, p. 86). The comedies conclude with the realization that 'there is no other life for them, and this one suffices' (*POH*, p. 239).

As we have already noted, however, this exposure demands more than the capacity of the individual to risk herself, or of two individuals to risk themselves. This risk requires the capacity of the community to welcome such an exposure. Talking in his reading of *His Girl Friday* about the necessary capacity for taking risks, Cavell states, 'the world must have room in it for this capacity' (*POH*, p. 183). What makes the Comedies of Remarriage realistic is their assessment of the risks involved in exposure to each other in the middle of an ugly world.

A particularly example of this is the world of Walter, the newspaperman in *His Girl Friday*. His is a world of constant catastrophe and improvisation. Yet, in each of the comedies, perhaps with the exception of *It Happened One Night*,

> there is some glimpse of an ugliness in the world outside, within which, or surrounded by which, the actions we witness take place. In particular, a glimpse of the failure of civilization to, let me say, make human beings civil. Each shows a world in which beings view others as objects of entertainment and scandal, as unequal to themselves, and would exclude others from civilization, treating them with a civilized ugliness ... or they show beings whose weirdness suggests that civilization has been unable to recruit them as equal to itself. [*POH*, p. 182f]

Remarriage and the social bond Having mentioned Walter's ugly world, Cavell reflects on how Locke (somewhat despite himself, it seems) described the state of nature as full of fears and dangers. Cavell likens Walter's world and Locke's state of nature to Hobbes' 'understanding of the state of nature, which he identifies as a state of war' (*POH*, p. 181).[17] The point of this description is for Cavell the fact that the state of nature is not just a conceptual fiction but an experience realized in human lives. Locke points to the conflicts between princes and their subjects or among independent states as conflicts that cannot be resolved by appeal to a higher authority. Cavell points to the relationships between the characters in the comedies of remarriage. No higher authority (be it natural law or society) can adjudicate between them. The same is true for the experiment America (*ibid.*). For Americans, Cavell writes, the questions of union and secession, of creation and continuation, are always in doubt. He continues: 'then the concept of marriage, understood as remarriage, as a search for reaffirmation, is not merely an analogy of the social bond, or a comment

17 Cavell is aware that Locke 'in his *Second Treatise of Government* objects to "some persons who have gone so far as to confuse the state of nature with a state of war," whereas they are as different from one another, in his words, as "a state of peace, goodwill, mutual assistance and preservation" is different from "a state of enmity, malice, violence and mutual destruction"' (*POH*, p. 180).

upon it, but it is a further instance of experimentation in consent and reciprocity. Thus does marriage again become of national importance' (*POH*, p. 182).

While marriage is not *merely* an analogy but a quasi-sacramental instantiation of the social bond, remarriage still provides a forceful symbol for our social bond. It helps us to see the character of this bond. The model of marriage allows Cavell to occupy a middle ground between an understanding of this bond as purely grounded in contractual relations, and an understanding where the social bond is conceived as based on natural attraction. Remarriage reveals more than the limitations of both theoretical accounts of society. Marriage combines the dynamics of both social convention and natural attraction theories. Cavell describes this unifying quality of marriage as the diurnal time, where the public time of the day (of laws, or the ordinary), and the private time of the night (of desire, dreams, or of the festival) meet (*POH*, pp. 15, 142, 143).

Connecting *The Philadelphia Story* with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Cavell claims that these comedies express the idea that 'the public world of the day cannot resolve its conflicts apart from resolutions in the private forces of the night' (*POH*, p. 142). A central conflict of the 'public world of the day' is the question of what legitimizes a marriage – which is another way to ask what legitimizes a society or our being in society. Cavell writes that

> ... our genre emphasizes the mystery of marriage by finding that neither law nor sexuality (nor, by implication, progeny) is sufficient to ensure true marriage and suggesting that what provides legitimacy is the mutual willingness for remarriage, for a sort of continuous reaffirmation, and one in which the couple's isolation from the rest of society is generally marked; they form as it were a world elsewhere. The spirit of comedy in these films depends on our willingness to entertain the possibility of such a world, one in which good dreams come true. [*ibid.*]

Remarriage and Rawls Cavell's work on the Comedies of Remarriage presents an alternative social philosophy *in nuce*: a vision of what binds society together and a vision of society. What binds society together in this vision is, as Élise Doménach notices in 'S. Cavell: Les chemins de la reconnaissance,' not ritualized acts of consent or conclusions of grand moral debates. Rather our mutual accords in ordinary actions (accords and actions which are invisible and discrete) bind us to each other.[18] Hence we can see in Cavell a nuanced critique of the Rawlsian picture of contract theory.

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18 Doménach writes: 'Nos accords ordinaires engagent notre responsabilité, notre devoir de résponse face á autrui. Notre appartenence á un même monde moral repose sur des accords et des engagements ordinaires, invisibles, discretes, et non sur des actes ritualisés ou des accords sur la conclusion d'un débat morale. Si ce type de communauté est d'emblée politique, c'est que s'expriment en elle les désaccords et les conflits. Tel est le sense de la critique de la démarche de Rawls dans la *Théorie de la justice* que Cavell formule dans *Conditions nobles et ignobles*, et qui s'apparente á l'analyse de Chantal Mouffe ('A propos d'un libéralism qui se dit politique,' *Esprit*, janv. 1995) ... En effet, l' 'accord originel' porte sur les principle de justice qui fondent la société, et non sur la société en tant que telle. Et la solution qui prône un consensus sur la théorie de la justice comme équité présente un dangereux penchant unanimiste. Elle présente l'ideal d'une société oú le conflit aura été éliminé, rendu illégitime par l'accord originel sur les principes' (Doménach, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 500).

Cavell does not negate the value of Rawls' vision of the conversation of justice in the original position, which is a position of assumed equality and mutuality in which we deliberate the founding principles of sociality and justice. On the contrary, Cavell certainly shares the vision implied in the idea of the conversation of justice in the original position, namely that every future citizen has an equal voice and that every voice can be heard.

Cavell criticizes Rawls for not discussing in sufficient detail a second conversation of justice, which has to happen once the guiding principles are in place. Unlike the thought-experiment of the first conversation of justice in the original position, this second conversation has to happen between real citizens in a concrete political context. Mulhall summarizes this point as follows: 'There is also the conversation actual citizens must have in settling judgments about the degree of embodiment of those principles in the actual society, or systems of institutions, of which they are part.'[19] Rawls claims that when actual citizens think that they are treated unjustly by society, these individuals have to show the following: how and where the treatment they experience by the institutions of society does not comply with 'the principles that characterize a well-ordered society under favorable circumstances.'[20]

Cavell points out that this requirement amounts to using the same procedures of 'reflexive equilibrium' by which the original conversation of justice took place. In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, he writes: 'In arriving at reflective equilibrium the picture is that judgment finds its derivation in a principle, something more universal, rational, objective, say a standard, from which it achieves its foundation or grounding' (*CHU*, p. xxvi). In the context of the criteria debate we have seen that this approach of referring to principles in the context of linguistic judgments implies a loss of voice. Thus, in the Rawlsian picture, a society is a form of benevolent dictatorship in which only something like the *voix generale* as disjointed from the *voix de chaqu'un oú chaqu'une* has a right to speak after the citizens have established the system of just institutions.[21] Here, peace and harmony have the price of disallowing the individual to speak her or his mind. Let us recall in this context what Cavell wrote about the temptation of grammar: 'Grammar cannot, or ought not, of itself dictate what you mean, what is up to you to say' (*TOS*, 45). To perceive of justice as principle-based, allows us likewise to hide behind the 'grammar' of principles, and to fail to see *my* responsibility for the concrete ways in which justice is institutionalized and administered in *my* society.[22]

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19 Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 271.

20 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) p. 533.

21 Cf. 'The demand of one's human nature for expression demands the granting of this human demand to others ... [the granting] of their voice in choosing the principles, or say ideas, of their lives ... every word urged from one in the state of conformity causes chagrin, violates the expression of our nature by pressing upon us an empty voice, hence would deprive us of participation in the conversation of justice' (*CHU*, p., xxxvi, cf. Mulhall, 'Stanley Cavell', p. 278).

22 If the use of the word 'man' is not in principle governed by a fixed rule, but depends on what we call 'being a man,' than I am responsible for our use of this word. Likewise with practices of justice.

The principled vision of justice misplaces, furthermore, my consent, as Cavell argues:

> The idea of directing my consent to the principles on which society is based rather than, as it were, to society as such, seems to be or to lead to an effort to imagine confining or proportioning the consent I give my society ... I cannot keep my consent focused on the success or grace of society; it reaches every corner of society's failure or ugliness. [*CHU*, p. 107f.]

The fact that my consent reaches everywhere implies that my responsibility for control and critique of society reaches everywhere. In Cavell's vision neither our 'attunement' in language nor our association in society, are predicated upon the working out of voiceless principles. Rather, they depend on the mutual voicing of 'a conviction whose grounding remains subjective – say myself – but which expects or claims justification from the (universal) concurrence of other subjectivities, on reflection; call this the acknowledgment of matching' (*CHU*, p. xxvi).[23] Society, as Doménach interprets Cavell, is not grounded on original principles. These principles are based on our communal judgments embodied in the institutions of our society. Mulhall summarizes Cavell's discussion of Nora in this context, to express what is at stake here:

> According to Rawls, Nora must, in order to legitimize her conviction of injustice, specify which institutions and individuals have treated her unjustly; but Thorvald points out, and she is happy to agree, that none of the reasons she might offer will be acceptable to those (like himself) who represent the way the world is and thinks – indeed, this awareness that countless things ... might be said in defense of the world she criticizes, is a vital part of her sense of outrage and violation. She is violated by every word that comes from the mouth of her society's representatives; she and they do not speak the same language.[24]

Far from being beyond reproach, society's representatives are confronted with a complaint grounded in a personal conviction. In the face of her complaint (and thus of Nora's claim to humanity) what is demanded is an act of acknowledgment. This would mean to honor her complaint by allowing her to challenge society and its distribution of power. Nora's challenge reveals Helmer's consent to the way things

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23 Mulhall comments on Cavell's position on moral arguments in *The Claim of Reason*, 'Cavell was seen to argue that moral discourse should be thought of as an arena within which any given individual comes to adopt her own position with respect to a given moral issue, a position which – whilst respecting the procedures and canons of relevance which maintain the rationality of moral argument – is not itself determined by those procedures, and which another may completely oppose; and any ensuing moral argument between the two is equally incapable of resolution by reference to those canons and procedures alone. The picture is thus one in which moral agents must make a judgment of finality concerning where they will stand and how they will regard the different stances of others, but in which such judgments cannot themselves be derived from or justified in terms of rules or principles' (Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 275f.).

24 Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 277.

are (cf. *CHU*, p. 112). Confronted with suffering such as Nora's we are confronted with our implication in the state of our societies:

> Then if, as is overwhelmingly likely, I continue to consent to the way things are, what must be shown, acknowledged, is that my consent, say my promise, compromises me; that that was something I always knew to be possible; that I know change is called for, and to be striven for, beginning with myself. But then I must also show, on pain of self-corruption worse than compromise, that I continue to consent to the way things are, without reason, with only my intuition that our collective intuition that our collective distance from perfect justice is, though at certain moments painful to the point of intolerable, still habitable, even necessary as a stage for continued change. [*ibid*]

Cavell's interpretation of the Comedies of Remarriage as presenting an emblem for society implies therefore also a counter-vision of society. As Doménach writes, Cavell acknowledges:

> at the same time the need for a consensus about a certain number of institutions in a liberal democracy, and the role of antagonism which guarantees pluralism within such a democracy. It is to this type of society, where the disaccord and the dissent are inscribed in the dynamic of a pluralist democracy, that Emerson and Thoreau voiced their allegiance.[25]

This acceptance of the need for antagonism is contrary to the uniformity that, according to Doménach, is implied in the Rawlsian idea of society. Here the rules that had been established in the conversation of justice have to be applied and be applicable with uniformity. Cavell wishes to provide a space for the voices of those whose experiences cannot be expressed in the language and values provided by society. Ultimately, he envisions a society where the previously silenced voices can be heard, and moreover, a society where the silence can be heard. In order to understand the latter point we have to turn to Cavell's discussion of the Melodrama of the Unknown Woman, a genre of films in which the happy and mutual conversation that constitutes marriage does fail.

The Unknown Woman

Masculine knowing

The Comedies of Remarriage envision a possible world in which the good dream of mutuality and equality can come true. In this dream, the woman finds a man who presents himself as acceptable for her education and thus a man who enables her to express her humanity:

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25 Doménach, 'Stanley Cavell,' p. 501 (English mine). Cavell 'exprime á la fois la nécessité d'un consensus sur un certain nombre d'institutions, dans une société libérale démocratique, et la part d'antagonisme qui en garantirait le pluralisme. C'est ce type de société, oú le désaccord et le dissensus s'inscrivent dans la dynamique d'une démocratie pluraliste, que'Emerson et Thoreau appeleaient de leur voeux.'

> The comedies envision a relation of equality between human beings that we may characterize, using favorite terms of Emerson's, as a relation of rightful attraction, of expressiveness and joy ... The relation as between human beings is not, in the comedies, perceived as one that pervades society as it stands, but it is shown to hold between a pair who are somehow exemplary of the possibilities of this society perceivable from its current stance. [*CT*, p. 9]

The Melodrama of the Unknown Woman, however, is the counter-genre to this vision of society. It presents us with the fate of, who Cavell calls, 'Nora's other, surely more numerous, descendants' (cf. *CT*, p. 85). They are 'women who have not found, and could not manage or relish a relationship with' a man who is fit to educate her; or they are women 'whom no man can be thought to educate' – like Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich (*ibid.*). The latter, writes Cavell, have acquired the highest degree of 'female independence so far as film can manifest it' (*ibid.*). The melodrama presents us with a failed or rejected or invalid attempt to educate and associate. This genre of films presents us with women who found independence not through marriage but through a change from within themselves. Thus changed, these women found the capacity to judge a world that denies them their humanity.

The women in both genres demand that their lives be shared in relationships of 'equality, mutual education, transfiguration, [and] playfulness.' Yet, the melodramatic movies represent those women whose demands are not met who have no choice but to opt for unknownness over a marriage of condescension and silencing (cf. *CT*, p. 11). Commenting on the subtitle of his writings on these films Cavell writes:

> ... a certain choice of solitude (figured in the refusal of marriage) as the recognition that the terms of one's intelligibility are not welcome to others – at least not as the basis for romantic investment in any present other whom those terms nominate as eligible – is, as suggested, what the idea of unknownness comes to in my use of the subtitle *The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. [*CT*, p. 12]

The comedies were fueled by the woman's desire to know something, namely 'to know that her desire is acceptable and what its satisfaction would look like' (*CT*, p. 20). In the melodramas the *terms* of the woman's knowledge of herself and of the man are not welcome to the man who would be eligible for her education. Her desire is rejected as unacceptable by the terms of knowledge set by the man. But what are those terms? The man sees her knowledge as an object, 'a prize or a victim' (*CT*, p. 13). His terms for knowing her are that he wants to know her while at the same time remain unknown by her. In this context it is helpful to recall what Cavell had said about Othello and his fear of Desdemona's knowledge of him:

> The violence in masculine knowing, explicitly associated with jealousy, seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession, call it private property. Othello's problem, following my suggestion that his problem is over success, not failure, is that Desdemona's acceptance, or satisfaction, or reward, of his ambition strikes him as being possessed, as if he were the woman. [*DK*, p. 10]

Like Othello, the men of the melodrama are not ready to be equally objects of knowledge. The man understands knowledge as access to and possession of privacy.

Likewise, in *Now, Voyager* the man wishes to know the woman's secret, in *Stella Dallas*, he tries to escape it, and in *Gaslight* to destroy it 'where each objective is generically reflected in the others' (*CT*, p. 14). By holding on to the idea of knowledge as breaking into privacy the man makes it impossible for the woman to expose herself to his knowledge. The kind of knowledge to which she could expose herself is deadly; the kind of knowledge she would need, in order be able to expose herself so that she can become herself, is not available.

Letter from an unknown woman

Cavell's reading of Max Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, speaks to this dynamic. Ophüls' film shows the woman to be created through metamorphosis, not however, by or with the man, but *for* him, privately – as her voice-over tells him (and us) posthumously:

> From that moment on I was in love with you. Quite consciously I began to prepare myself for you. I kept my clothes neater so that you wouldn't be ashamed of me. I took dancing lessons; I wanted to become more graceful, and learn good manners – for you. So that I would know more about you and your world, I went to the library and studied the lives of great musicians. [*CT*, p. 107]

Let me compare this with Lucy who, according to Cavell, also 'recreates herself; and, it can be said, creates herself in his image, though it is an image he did not know he had or know was possible in this form' (*POH*, p. 260). Cavell continues to say that what is wrong with imagination is not *that* but *how* people use their imagination. The fact that the woman is created in the face of the man's imagination is not the problem. The problem in the melodramas lies in how the man imagines her to be and consequently in his desire to remain unchanged, unexposed, and private. Jerry, on the other hand, can express his confusion and helplessness to Lucy: 'He casts his confusion about changing, becoming different, into words, thus making himself vulnerable to the therapy of love' (*POH*, p. 261).

Repetition and time That the men in the melodrama resist change is expressed formally, according to Cavell, by the use of repetitions. In the comedies, repetitious events and words provide a chance for improvisation and inventiveness, thus casting the recurrence of time as 'open to a second chance' (*CT*, p. 108). Cavell links this creative repetition of the ordinary domestic life with Nietzsche's medicine against the death of nostalgia or against the revenge against time and its 'It was' (*CT*, p. 83). The idea of repetition 'may be said to require of our lives the perpetual invention of the present from the past, out of the past' (cf. *ibid.*). To embrace the task of this invention enables the 'transformation of incestuous knowledge into erotic exchange' (*CT*, p. 82). Ordinary repetition requires letting go of a nostalgic attachment to a vision of a primordial time of diffusion without beginning or ending. Thus, to the degree that the man has resolved his oedipal drama he is capable of accepting the task of the repetitive reinvention of himself in the face of separate others and, importantly, in the face of women (cf. *CT*, p. 110).

In the absence of the resolved Oedipal drama, however, repetition expresses another meaning. In Ophüls' film and in melodrama in general, the actors in the drama cannot escape recurring words, actions and feelings:

> Time is transient, closed, and repetition signals death – whether the repetition is of the camera movements (for example, the famous ironic repetition of the girl's waiting and watching on the stairs) or its words ('I'll see you in two weeks, two weeks') or its imagery (the woman's denial of chance and her weddedness to fate is given heavy symbolization in the film's endless iteration of iron bars, which become less barriers against this woman's desire than medium of it). [*Ibid.*]

Here, the man cannot experience the transience of time as a time of becoming since becoming is predicated on separation. The man resists consequently the idea of change.[26]

In a familiar move, Cavell connects a formal feature of film (the fact that the images make an absent past mechanically present) with a thematic issue. At the end of Ophüls' movie, the man is confronted with a series of images from the past. These images make him relive instances of his encounters with the unknown woman who sent him the (title-giving) accusing letter. The mechanical replication of these past images strike Cavell as producing a sense of the 'uncanny,' which he relates, contrary to Freud, to the 'uncertainty whether an object is living or inanimate' (*ibid.*).[27] The mechanical repetition at the end of the movie presses the thematic point of the movie: is the man capable of seeing and acknowledging the woman and of knowing her as a being with a soul? Can he see her as human being?

As in the comedies, the topic of the movie reflects the task of the man to imagine the woman in the replicated images as a human being. Cavell pointed out that such an acknowledgment of another as other is only possible after the Oedipal conflict has been resolved. The man in Ophüls' film, like the men in the melodrama, apparently failed to resolve this conflict. Consequently, they fail to acknowledge the otherness of the woman and her humanity.

The refusal of the feminine man The sequence of images from earlier moments when the man had lived with the woman proves to be a deadly assault on him. Confronted

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26 The ending dialogue of *It Happened One Night* expresses comically how becoming is predicated on being both different and the same. Jerry's decisive words are 'Things are different, except in a different way. You're still the same, only I have been a fool. Well, I'm not now. So, as long as I'm different, don't you think things could be the same again? Only a little different' (cf. *POH*, p. 258).

27 Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' discusses E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale 'The Sand-Man,' about a beautiful automaton. Cavell finds Freud's denial that the uncanniness of the tale is related to the above-mentioned uncertainty, unconvincing: 'One would have expected Sigmund Freud in this context to invoke the castration complex precisely as a new explanation or interpretation of the particular uncertainty in question, to suggest it as Hoffmann's pre-psychoanalytic insight that one does not see others as other, acknowledge their (animate) human existence, until the Oedipal drama is resolved under the threat of castration, the threat of a third person' (*CT*, p. 110).

with these images, he covers his eyes in a gesture of horror and avoidance. Covering the eyes is for Cavell an ambiguous gesture located between

> ... the horror of knowing the existence of others, and avoiding horror of not knowing it, between avoiding the threat of castration that makes the knowledge accessible and avoiding the threat of outcastness should that threat fail – he is in that gesture both warding off seeing something and warding off at the same time his being seen by something, which is to say, his own existence being known, being seen by the woman of the letter, by the mute director and his (her?) camera – say by the power of art – and seen by us, which accordingly identifies us, the audience of the film, as assigning ourselves the position, in its passiveness and its activeness, of the source of the letter and of the film; which is to say, the position of the feminine. Then it is the man's horror of us that horrifies us – the revelation, or avoidance, of ourselves in a certain way of being feminine, way of being human, a mutual and reflexives state, let us say, of victimization. [*CT*, p. 111]

Let me draw attention to the easily overlooked dynamics of identification and denied identification with the audience of the film, with 'us,' in this passage. Describing the mechanical repetition of the past images of the woman, Cavell had stated that these images returned as those 'exact moments *we and the man* have witnessed, or perhaps, imagined, together' (*CT*, p. 110, italics added). Here 'the man' and 'we' are in the same position, as an imagined audience facing the repetitive images of the woman. Yet, in his reaction to being seen by her and by us as audience we are notably different from him. What horrifies him about us is that we are in the position of 'the feminine.' Thus, Cavell seems to say that this horror can only occur if *our* position is presumed to be originally masculine. We should be masculine as audience yet we turn out to be feminine. This is the operative understanding of gender in Cavell's analysis. That which is seen should be feminine, yet it turns out to be masculine.

This is what triggers the man's castration anxiety. In this sequence, the tables are turned. The 'feminine' whose position it is to be seen becomes the director of the seeing gaze. The man whose position it is to see becomes located in 'the feminine' position. The man's avoidance of 'the feminine' deals death to the woman and it deals death to himself. This avoidance made it impossible for the woman to prove her existence to him. She remains uncreated and thus dies. At the same time, the avoidance of 'the feminine' is an avoidance of his own existence as being known, as being passive and feminine, and as being hence created by another.[28]

In more general terms, we can see now how Cavell's analysis of film and of avoidance depends on the following symbolism of gender: the 'male' side of the human character symbolizes that which is to see and the 'female side of the human character' symbolizes that which is to be seen.

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28 Cf. Karen Hanson's observation that besides showing that the 'Cartesian certainty of self-existence produces a profound uncertainty about the existence of others[,] ... Cavell has detected and described a yet more unsettling counterproduction: skepticism about others erodes the self. The implications of this reciprocity have been studied by Cavell, and he has mapped the moral and metaphysical transmutations of what had seemed an essentially epistemological problem' (Karen Hanson, 'Being Doubted, Being Assured,' in Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (eds), *Images in Our Soul. Cavell, Psychoanalysis, and Cinema* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 187–201, p. 189.

Self-creation, the star, and her body

Stella Dallas Confronted with men who are not willing and capable of engaging in mutual conversation 'the woman must achieve her transformation otherwise in the implied melodrama' (*CT*, p. 117). She must create herself in the face of the violence of masculine knowing. This self-creation is expressed in the melodrama through the trope of gaining a new identity. The movies visualize this transformation of identity through changes of her body – or in and around her body, like new ways of carrying herself, new dresses and appearances (cf. *CT*, p. 126). In this new identity the woman sheds the violating and inappropriate identity, which was provided to her by the world of male knowledge.

Consider, for example, Stella Dallas's scandalous appearance at a resort hotel frequented by the *crème de la crème* of Stephen's world. She is bedecked with excessive jewelry and furs. Cavell interprets this 'Christmas tree spectacle' as Stella's way of appealing to the 'distaste of those for whom she knows she is distasteful' (*CT*, p. 202). Stella performs her exclusion from Stephen's world by presenting her audience with their reading of her. We have no reason to assume that her over-decorated appearance reflects Stella's own taste, writes Cavell (*ibid.*). The care with which her preparation for this appearance is shown suggests rather that she plans to be a spectacle. In so doing she reveals the position of the woman in an unwelcoming world of men:

> The woman's problem is not one of not belonging but one of belonging, only on the wrong terms; unlike the exile, the woman is not between two different cultures but is at odds with the one in which she was born and is roughly in the process of transfiguration into one that does not exist, one as it were still in confinement. [*CT*, p. 213]

Her display theatricalizes the fact that Stella is at odds with Stephen's culture. This, in turn, declares Stella's right not to accept the terms of his culture and not to accept Stephen's terms of association and conversation. Her scene prepares Stella for the freedom to leave 'not just the man of the marriage but the consequence of a marriage she allowed herself to believe would transform her' (*CT*, p. 217).

Stella is free to express and realize her own taste, which is not a taste for the world of men any longer. Has she ever had a desire for the world of men? By characterizing her family of origin as primitive, Cavell suggests that Stella early on had a sense of not being at home in the world she was supposed to call home. Cavell recalls for us

> ... the wooden, shadowy father delivering ugly orders; the monosyllabic, helpless mother; the noisy, nervous brother, the filthiness of whose hands is ambiguous as being caused by his work in the mill, or by his maleness or by his incestuousness; and Stella's primping before the cheap mirror, as if always knowing that, wherever else she finds to be, she does not belong, she from the beginning does not belong here, at what the world calls home. [*CT*, p. 218]

At the end of the movie, and of her attempts to find a home in the world of men, Stella walks away, ratifying her own taste, 'that is the taking on the thinking of her own existence' (*CT*, p. 219). She proves her own existence without fully knowing

who she is, who proves, and who is proved. Here she is stripped of ornaments and Barbara Stanwyck's Stella is without spectacular beauty or 'obvious glamour' (cf. *ibid.*). Lacking *obvious* glamour we know nevertheless, says Cavell, that she has a future: 'She is presented *here* as a star (the camera showing her that particular insatiable interest in her every action and reaction), which entails the promise of return, of unpredictable reincarnation' (*ibid.*).[29] The camera is drawn to her self-reflexivity.

The female star as Emersonian icon The star is for Cavell the icon of the 'Emersonianism' of film. The star exemplifies film's capacity to present us with highest reaches of 'glamorous independence' (*CT*, p. 7, cf. p. 218). I wish to interpret the idea of 'glamour' as reflecting Cavell's observation that objects on film, in their peculiar luminosity, possess an inherent self-reflexivity. Stars are independent because they are glamorous in this particular self-reflexive sense, which means through their thinking for themselves and expressing their own tastes. Stars are icons for our human desire to have an original voice, authentic experiences, and finally a body of their own. Thus, Cavell often notes the idiosyncrasies of stars, such as Bette Davis, Mae West, and Greta Garbo (cf. *CT*, p. 128).

Cavell had argued the following: 'The sets of "fixed attitudes and attributes" by which types are defined – as these are at work in the experience of film – are established by the individual and total physiognomy (of face, of figure, of gait, of temperament) of the human being taking part in the drama' *(WV*, p. 175). This is why idiosyncratic actors on film establish a type, call him Clark Gable or call her Great Garbo. I want to say that the idea of the star as one who creates individualized types (types with only one token) visualizes Cavell's Emersonian vision of humanity. Individuals in their strict separateness – with their idiosyncrasies – can stand for humanity as a species being.

Whereas the stars in the Comedies stand for humanity achievable in mutuality, the stars in the Melodrama stand for a humanity that can be gained only through a rejection of the terms of a society that has no words for these types. In this aversion the women of the melodrama are not only claiming the right to speak their own mind. They are also claiming the right to judge this world that has nothing but silence to offer, which is either the silencing of her voice in an abusive marriage, or the silence

29 Rothman agrees with this reading: 'In "Virtue and Villainy in the Face of the Camera," I argued that *Stella Dallas* ... in no way glorifies a woman's submission to a system that unjustly denies her equal right to pursue happiness. My understanding of the film, like Cavell's, rejects the generally accepted critical view that such melodramas affirm a woman's noble *sacrifice* of her happiness, that there are things more important than a woman's happiness. When Stella, standing outside in the rain, unseen, watches her daughter's wedding through a window and then turns away with a secret smile, she is not a figure of pathos but a mysterious, heroic figure who has transformed herself before our very eyes, with no help from any man in her world. This is a transcendental moment of self-fulfillment, not of self-sacrifice.' Rothman stresses how the Hollywood films of what he calls the Classical American cinema are meant to stress this right of a woman to happiness: William Rothman, 'Hollywood Reconsidered: Reflections on the Classical American Cinema,' in Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (eds), *The Senses of Stanley Cavell* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), pp. 175–85, p. 181.

of inexpressiveness in her isolated unknownness (cf. CT, p. 127).[30] *The women of the melodrama demand the transformation of a man's world, and they transcend the position ascribed to them in this world.*

Theatricalization of the body How can the women demand this? Whence their power? Cavell locates the power of these women in their body, particularly in their penchant for 'hysteria.' For Cavell this is a capacity to use psychosexual energies to modify the body. Instead of transposing these energies into consciousness or discharging them into practice, hysterics display somatization (cf. *CT*, pp. 105, 127). Cavell comments that while every psychophysical being possesses this capacity for somatization,

> a particular aptitude for it is required for a given sufferer to avail herself or himself of hysteria over other modes of symptom formation, as in obsessions or phobias. The aptitude demands, for example, what Freud calls 'somatic compliance,' together with high intelligence, a plastic imagination, and hallucinatory 'absences,' which Anna O. (in *Studies on Hysteria*) taught Breuer to think of as her 'private theatre,' [sic!]. [*CT*, p. 105]

Cavell treats this penchant for hysteria as not necessarily pathological but as rather representing *a human genius* for a 'theatricality of the body.' Expressiveness through (conscious) words is replaced by an expressiveness of the body (*CT*, p. 127). The world of the man, which entraps the women of the melodrama, provides no words for their tastes. This means that there exists no admissible verbal expression for their desires and their self. Hence, these women have to employ their capacity for 'somatic compliance, for the theatricalization of desire' (*CT*, p. 128).[31]

Let me connect this point with my earlier claims that: (1) in order for us to have an inner life (a self and desire) we have to have a language; and (2) in order for us to have language we have to have community. Like Cordelia at Lear's court, or Nora in Helmer's house and world, the women of the melodrama are being denied a language in which they could have a self. By being denied expression for their inner life they are also denied their own separate bodies. Since *this* soul is not allowed to express herself and since the body is the best picture for the human soul, a denial of the self involves a denial of the body and vice-versa. Consequently, a recuperation or creation of self involves for us, men and women alike, a recuperation or creation of the body. We can, therefore, understand Nora's leaving Helmer's house, and Stella's walking towards us not just as a dislocation. Rather, these movements are part of gaining a new bodily attitude, that is, as a bodily expression of aversion. These walks represent the point where the woman rejects with her body the inexpressiveness imposed by a male world without 'yet knowing who she is who is proving her existence' (*CT*, p. 219). These walks further represent the vision of a future where the woman can find and express who she is. What we witness at the end of *Stella*

30 The price for 'association' in the melodrama would be the sacrifice of her own taste or her own voice. The price for happiness through her own voice is isolation. In both choices society demands a sacrifice from its women.

31 Cavell describes here the particular powers of Bette Davis, yet I think these words describe well the talent for somatization exhibited by other women stars as well.

Dallas is the creation of a star, writes Cavell, and this implies 'the promise of return, of unpredictable reincarnation' (*CT*, p. 219).

Let me connect the unpredictability of the embodiment of the inner lives of the woman star with the idea of improvisation. The life of improvisation replaces the 'present self-tortures and fixated desperations' (*CT*, p. 158). Facing the breakdown of the marriage fantasy under the pressures of undomesticated male villainy, the women stars break out. Through bodily experimentation they leave behind their fixed places in the male world. These bodily improvisations are unpredictable, unheard of, and un-envisioned. There are yet no words in this society, as we have seen, for these women to express and thus have their inner lives. 'Whitman's word for the overcoming of fixation is "the open road",' writes Cavell (*CT*, p. 142). The women stars travel toward the expression and creation of their inner lives on such an open road.

Greta Garbo's jouissance What is at stake in these bodily experimentations can become clearer if we look at Cavell's reflections on Greta Garbo and her capacity for somatization:

> It is as if Garbo has generalized this aptitude beyond human doubting – call this aptitude or talent for, and will to, communicate – generalized it to a point of absolute expressiveness, so that the sense of failure to know her, of her being beyond us (say visibly absent), is itself the proof of her existence ... In Garbo's most famous postures in conjunction with a man, she looks away or beyond or through him, as if in an absence (a distance from the present), hence as if to declare that this man, while the occasion for her passion, is surely not its cause. I find ... that I see her *jouissance* as remembering something, but let's say, remembering it from the future, within a private theater, not dissociating herself from the present moment, but knowing it forever, in its transience, as finite, from her finitude, or separateness, as from the perspective of her death; as if she were herself transformed into a mnemonic symbol, a monument of memory ... What the monument means to me is that a joyful passion for one's life contains the ability to mourn, the acceptance of transience, of the world as beyond one — say, one's other. [*CT*, p. 107]

What gives the woman star the power to envision herself in aversion to society, and thus to embody herself, is her ability to conceive herself from the point of view of the future, and from the point of view of a private theater. It is important to understand this privacy as functioning like Emerson's whim. In her privacy is born a vision of self that is not the exclusive possession of Garbo. She stands for humanity and in so doing projects a future in which this vision might be known and acknowledged. Her privacy, like her inexpressiveness, differs from the skeptic's feared and desired fantasy of privacy.[32] The skeptic's sense of 'powerlessness to make myself known' to others, and of 'powerlessness to make myself known to myself,' was motivated by a fear of the expressiveness of language (*CR*, p. 352). The male skeptic feared

32 Cavell flags the problem that his writings on the woman's demand for a voice might either help 'to articulate or to blur the difference between the denial to woman of political expression and a man's melancholy sense of his own inexpressiveness' (*CT*, p. 221). I wish to show in the following – contrary to Modleski – that Cavell's philosophy actually helps to articulate this difference (cf. Modleski, *Feminism Without Women*).

to be known by his other and his fear was a fear of becoming passive. Garbo's privacy is not a hiding place from exposure. Rather, recalling Breuer's connections of absence, imagination, and the private theater, we can see the somatizing woman's 'private theater' as allowing the following. She can be absent to the definitions *this* society imposes on her despite the fact that she remains exposed to this society. In 'Being Odd, Getting Even' Cavell writes, 'The fantasy of aloneness in the world may be read as saying that the step out of aloneness, or self-absorption, has to come without the assurance of others. (Not, perhaps, without their help)' (*IQO*, p. 119). This is certainly true for the male skeptic's melancholia of inexpressiveness. For the woman, the situation is more difficult. She has to step out of her isolation not only without the assurance of others, or without their help, but furthermore in antagonism to a male world.

Cavell continues:

> 'No one comes' is a tragedy for a child. For a grown-up it means the time has come to be the one who goes first (to offer oneself, allow oneself, to be, let us say, known). To this way of thinking, politics ought to have provided conditions for companionship, call it fraternity; but the price of companionship has been the suppression, not the affirmation, of otherness, that is to say, of difference and sameness, call these liberty and equality. A mission for Emerson's thinking is never to let politics forget this. In declaring that his life is not for a spectacle but for itself, Emerson is not denying that it is a spectacle, and he thus inflects and recrosses his running themes of being seen, of shame, and of consciousness. [*Ibid.*]

In my analysis, Greta Garbo and the female stars are, therefore, visual emblems of Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance.[33] The women's aversion to society echoes Thoreau's 'self-withheld voice.' Their silence reflects not only the fact that they cannot speak in a society that has no words for them and their embodiments of humanity (cf. *TOS*, 50). Their silence is also an expression of civil disobedience. They withhold their voice and their consent for their society. Consider the following passage of Thoreau:

> Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the gods he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. [Thoreau, Chapter 11, § 14][34]

Cavell comments: 'What *we* know as self-consciousness is only our opinion of ourselves, and like any other opinion it comes from outside; it is hearsay, our contribution to public opinion. We must become disobedient to it, resist it, no longer listen to it' (*SOW*, p. 107). *The women in the melodrama find in themselves the power to speak in disobedience by envisioning new selves for and out of themselves.*

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33 True, the first thing we see upon opening Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* is a picture of a smiling Cary Grant with the caption 'This man, in words of Emerson's, carries the holiday in his eye; he is fit to stand the gaze of millions' (*Remarriage*). Yet, the idea of the male star is underdeveloped. Again a tantalizing question arises: why is a woman an emblem for a problem that is apparently so male? Why is she a figure of salvation for him?

34 Quoted in: Stanley Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, p. 107.

Societal and communal transformation is predicated on individual transformation. The emblem of the power and risk of this individual transformation is the unknown woman.

The Emersonian self of the unknown woman

To complete our analysis of the fate of the descendants of Nora let us now turn to Cavell's understanding of Emersonian perfectionism. This part of his work implicitly relates to the kind of transformation that Cavell imagines in both the comedies and the melodramas. He sees Emersonian perfectionism as the 'dimension of the moral life' that addresses the following issue. What enables the 'formation of moral consciousness as such, of the self as a thing of cares and commitments, one which to exist has to find itself, which underlies the myth of the self as on a journey' (*Pitch*, 142)? Mulhall describes Cavell's perfectionism as embodying

> ... an idea of the individual's truth to herself or to the humanity in herself; it is an understanding of the soul as on an upward or onward journey that begins by finding oneself lost in the world and requires a refusal of society in the name of some further, more cultivated or cultured, state of society and the self. As the myth of a journey would imply, talk of perfectionism here does not entail an idea of perfectability, as if Emerson conceives of there being any given state of the self that is final, unsurpassable rather than simply unsurpassed; it rather captures the idea that each given and attained state of the self is final, in that each constitutes a world that the self can and does desire, to which it is (and is always at risk of remaining) attached – a world that is, one might say, self-sufficient.[35]

The attainable self Central to Cavell's discussion of Emerson's conception of the self is the distinction between the self as 'always having been attained' and the self as 'always having to be attained' (*CHU*, p. xxi):

> That there should be ... two forms of perfectionist crisis – motion and constancy, as if inertia is interpretable also as a law of human identity – is given by the self as a thing existing in perpetual relation to itself; it is to understand for itself a world in which to live, as if it must be affirmed or denied, so that while a self so conceived is characterized by the possibility of being attracted to transform the given world, it is simultaneously (barring catastrophe) attracted to the understanding of its present world as one achieved, chosen, hence as final. [*Pitch*, p. 142]

The fact that the present world or self is attained reflects the idea of humanity as natal, that is, as in need of creation and as the product of becoming. Such a present state is never simply *given* but it is attained or reached. Therefore, each present state of self or society presupposes consent or acknowledgment. We have to realize who it is we have become; and we have to realize that, since our present self is the product of a past, we also could have become someone else. We have to become open for what we will or can become. In works that Cavell considers as perfectionist, from Plato's *Republic* to the Comedies of Remarriage, this double realization takes place

35 Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell. Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, p. 265.

in the context of a conversation.[36] More specifically, this is a conversation between older and younger friends. Here the older friend is intellectually authoritative because 'his life is somehow exemplary or representative of a life the other(s) are attracted to' (*CHU*, p. 6). The younger person realizes in this attraction to the elder's life that he was chained or fixated to a life of conformity that removes him from his own vision of self (*ibid.*). Thus, the teacher embodies what the pupil can become by becoming more himself or herself. This process of becoming is facilitated by a gradual educational discussion 'in which each self is drawn on a journey of ascent to a further state of self' (*CHU*, p. 7).

Cavell clearly understands the leading man in the comedies to be the teacher – the older friend – for the women. I see, however, an additional teacher-student relationship expressed in the movies. Thoreau or Emerson are teachers for their readers and present them with a model of what it means to live a human life. Likewise, the couples of the Comedies of Remarriage can function as teachers for their audiences by presenting them with a model human community. By reading these texts and watching the stars the audience participates in utopian visions of society and self: 'This implies that I am already participating in that transformation of myself of which the transformed city, the good city, is the expression' (*CHU*, p. 8). The movies I watch, the works we read, and the men and women we listen to, constitute my nextness. They are continually presenting me with visions of a next step on my journey of self. They are invitations to project our humanity into a new context. Like new projections in language, however, there is no other basis (transcendental or otherwise) upon which to follow or reject such a projection. There is no *one* concept for humanity or for being true to oneself. Neither the acceptability nor the authenticity of a vision of being myself is predetermined by rules or concepts. It is, therefore, important to note that this journey has no prescribed direction or end result. As Cavell writes in the Preface to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (p. xxxiv):

> This fantasy of a noumenal self as one's true self seems to me rather to be a certain expression or interpretation of the fantasy of selflessness (Kant's holy will; Bakei's Unborn (cited on page 5); the idea would be that the end of all attainable selves is the absence of self, of partiality. Emerson variously denies this possibility ('Around every circle another can be drawn,' from 'Circles'), but it seems that all he is entitled (philosophically) to deny is that such a state can be attained (by a self, whose next attainment is always a self). Presumably, a religious perfectionism may find that things can happen otherwise. The idea of the self as on (or lost with respect to) a path, as a direction to a fixed goal needs its own study. I suppose selflessness may be figured as itself a goal or else as constituted by goallessness (satirizable as idleness). Emerson's thought of endless, discontinuous encirclings, or, as elsewhere, as steps up or down, does not imply a single, or any, direction, hence, in one sense, no path (plottable from outside the journey) ... I assume no role for the idea of a true (or false) self. Such an idea seems rather something imposed from outside oneself, as from another who has a use for oneself on condition that one is beyond desire, beyond change; which surely does not deny that such another might be oneself.

36 Note the important description of perfectionism and genre in Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 445.

The doubled self This last point leads to Thoreau's vision of the self and, more precisely, his understanding of the role of self-consciousness. Mulhall writes that Thoreau 'thinks that my self is something towards which I can stand in a variety of relations – ones that are named by the same terms with which we name our relations to other selves, e.g., love, hate disgust, acceptance, knowledge, ignorance, shame.'[37] One element of this doubled self, or better one possible stance in having an inner life, is the function of the detached observer. Thoreau writes in § 2 of Chapter 5 of *Walden*:

> [W]ith thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences... We are not wholly involved in Nature ... I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts or affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but a spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you. [quoted in *SOW*, p. 102]

Thoreau calls the other element or stance in having an inner life the 'indweller' or the unconscious workman. Cavell describes this stance in *The Senses of Walden*, as follows:

> We are to reinterpret our sense of doubleness as a relation between ourselves in the aspect of indweller, unconsciously building, and in the aspect of spectator, impartially observing. Unity between these aspects is viewed not as a mutual absorption, but as a perpetual nextness, and act of neighboring or befriending ... When his imagination and his body sit down at the same table to eat they are etymologically companions ... To maintain nextness to ourselves, we require new, or newly conceived capacities for constancy and for change. [*SOW*, pp. 108f.]

The body built by the indweller or the workman 'whose eye cannot see to the end of his labor,' represents the current state of the self (*SOW*, p. 109). *This* is who I am now. On the other hand, the impersonality of the spectator is a state of 'absolute awareness of self without embarrassment' (*SOW*, p. 103). This impersonal absolute awareness is what Thoreau describes as imagination in the line that imagination and body 'should sit down at the same table' (Chapter 11, § 6).

Cavell points out that 'being beside myself' is a definition for ecstasy, and reads Thoreau as suggesting that my knowledge of myself as a human being – a knowledge assuring my identity (this *is* who I am) – is experienced as a sane ecstasy (*SOW*, p. 104). *I am reminded here of Cavell's reading of Greta Garbo's* jouissance*. A man does not provoke her ecstatic knowledge of herself. Rather, memory and future derived from her privacy provide her with visions of what it means to be human. Her imagination is both expressive of her individual taste and it is impersonal and human. In the Thoreauvian picture, the power to judge the 'indweller' is derived from these personal visions into what it could mean to be human.*

37 Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 256.

Redemptive reading Let me further this interpretation with the help of Cavell's Thoreauvian and Freudian theory of redemptive reading (which supplements the above-mentioned Emersonian theory of reading).[38] The most striking feature of this model of redemptive reading is that it inverts who is read and who is reading: 'It is not first of all the text that is subject to interpretation but we in the gaze or hearing of the text' ('Politics of Interpretation', p. 52). The text analyzes the readers, and our relationship to the text is one of transference. In his essay 'Psychoanalysis and Cinema,' Cavell specified this process of transference in reading as one of 'counter-transference' (*CT*, p. 113). He wished to express the idea that my transferences onto the blank screen of the text are already dependent upon the text's transference onto me. Who does the text think I am; and what is it that the text wants from me? *As readers of the melodramas or the comedies, our unconscious wishes are projected onto the screen in such a way that they are critically reflected back onto us. Simultaneously – and Cavell stresses the point that there is no before or after between counter-transference and transference – these movies have a vision of who we are. These films invite us to unfreeze our vision of society and self or to bring into play our fantasies of what it means to be a man or a woman and of what it means to associate.* In the case of the comedies, these are happy fantasies of what is humanly possible. The glamour and utopian material abundance in which these comedies are played out provide an element of counter-seduction. To free our fixated visions of self and our silenced voice these images of glamorous lives help to seduce us into a world in which having a voice is possible and desirable. At the same time the idiosyncrasy of the stars has to help us realize that we can attain what these individuals have attained for themselves. In contrast, the melodramas present the audience with dark fantasies of what is humanly possible. They show us a society governed by rejection and in so doing make the viewers aware of how our own desires contribute to and cooperate with the depicted ways of being male or female. The transformation of our society is only possible to the degree that individual men and women acknowledge their responsibility by projecting new visions of what it means to be human and to live in association. As Cavell writes: 'the idea of consent ... asks me to make my society mine, one in which I am spoken for, where my voice may be raised in assessing the present state of society against a further or next state of society' (*CHU*, p. 27). *A motif that we know from Cavell's philosophy of language reappears (in a somber modulation) in Cavell's philosophizing about the social: the individual in her creativity has to make sure that language is possible and develops. The melodramatic variation here is that the individual has to act in aversion to a society that silences her. In my reading of Cavell's work on cinema it becomes clear that the burden of change and creativity rests on the woman. Out of the recesses of her own soul and without the help of another, the female star has to envision a new humanity, both for herself and for*

38 In 'Politics of Interpretation,' Cavell points to 'Thoreau's way of saying that reading his book is redemptive' (p. 51). Then Cavell goes on to claim that 'the idea of redemption or redemptive reading and interpretation will not be credible [for most of us] apart from a plausible model or picture of how a text can be therapeutic, that is, apart from an idea of the redemptive as psychological' (*ibid.*).

those who silenced her. In hearing her voice we are judged. Without a woman's creativity neither society nor language can flourish – says Cavell. The woman is both victim and savior.

Gender and Skepticism

Women and narcissistic thinking

Cavell's reflections on opera in *A Pitch of Philosophy* will help to understand how and with which kind of power women are able to judge the world from a stance of absence. Cavell describes a central feature of singing as 'expressing the inexpressible – *in loss* or *in discovery*' (*Pitch*, 154, italics added). The women in opera express in their song the

> ... sense of being pressed or stretched between two worlds – one in which to be seen, the roughly familiar world of the philosophers, and one from which to be heard, one to which one releases or abandons one's spirit ... and which recedes when the breath of the song ends. This expression of the inexpressible (for there is no standing language of that other world; it requires understanding without meaning) I described as a mad state, as if opera is naturally pitched at this brink. [*Pitch*, p. 144]

Like Garbo and the female stars, the singing women in opera expose themselves to the male world. Like Garbo and the female stars, the divas find within themselves the power to embody aversion; but they do so from a place that is absent to the presence of the male world. In what he calls the *experience of loss*, Cavell expresses the connection of singing to orality. The woman expresses herself from a pre-verbal place of feeling pain. Consequently the diva sings without a concept and without any assurance that she will be understood or will be able to make sense. Cavell mentions here Kant's idea of the possibility that an aesthetic judgment's claim to universality is solely based on subjective grounds. The point is 'to propose that we think of the voice in opera as a judgment of the world on the basis of, called forth by, pain beyond a concept.' Opera seduces us therapeutically, by calling us to listen to this pain and 'to understand beyond explanation' (*Pitch*, p. 149). This pain expresses the forced separation of the woman's self from herself in a world where there are no words for her, 'a separation that may be figured as being forced into a false marriage' (*Pitch*, p. 151). It recalls the primitive terror of separation from the mother-breast monad in infancy, says Cavell. In this experience, singing expresses the diva's abandonment to her words. In its inexpressiveness this experience of loss – like music – points to a place of 'understanding *before* what we might call meaning, as if it exists in permanent anticipation of – hence in perpetual dissatisfaction with, even disdain for – what can be said' (*Pitch*, p. 160). In what he names the *experience of discovery*, Cavell links singing further to orgasm and to an experience of self from an absence. In singing the woman is beside herself. This points to her 'nextness to a grander world,' a transcendent realm intervening into our world in the form of an 'irrupting of a new perspective of the self to itself' (*Pitch*, p. 145). The woman abandons herself to this knowledge. In this abandonment she is willing to 'depart from all

settled habitation, all conformity of meaning' (*Pitch*, p. 144). In her – according to Cavell – inexpressible orgasm she becomes the emblem of the 'human as immigrant' (*ibid.*). Abandonment in loss of connection and abandonment in *jouissance* are the characteristic features of singing as narcissism, according to Cavell. Bringing Cavell into dialogue with Julia Kristeva's reworking of psychoanalytic theory will allow me in the next chapter to analyze this point further.

Let me flag at this point that the narcissism of the women of opera differs from the narcissism of the women in the Comedies of Remarriage. The latter, as we have seen, presents an obstacle to the woman's forming a communal bond with a man and suffering creation by him. This obstacle has to be overcome in order for her to find her separate voice. Narcissism in opera allows the diva to resist being pressed into a community that denies her a separate voice. Despite these differences, we can see again the gender asymmetry in Cavell's writing. Women and men (or 'the feminine' and 'the masculine' sides of our characters) have to play different roles in the creation of our society. Women have to be educated by feminine men to overcome their fear of finitude and separation; and men have to be educated to overcome their fear of 'the feminine' in order to become educators. In its self-reflexiveness singing becomes an emblem of Emersonian aversive thinking. In such thinking (and only this thinking deserves to be called thinking) we are abandoned to the words of our language; yet we are also performing a willingness to leave the habitation of those words behind.

> This idea ... of narcissism, in its picture or structure of self-reflection, is also a figure for thinking, as in Descartes' proof of one's existence, and one's alone, except God's – a turn towards the self that at once preserves itself and stays the vanishing of the rest of creation. And Narcissus came up for me ... as a figure of the skeptic's desire to remain in control of his answers, a desire that makes his answers echoes, new existences of course, but not new enough ... The woman's singing ... exposes her as thinking, so exposes her to the power of those who do not want her to think, do not, that is to say, want autonomous proof of her existence. [*Pitch*, p. 146]

Cavell qualifies this general characterization of thinking as self-reflexive and narcissistic by turning to the opening duet of *La Nozze de Figaro*. Cavell interprets Figaro's counting in the opera's opening duet ('Cinque, dieci, venti, trenta' – 'Five, ten, twenty, thirty') as showing the man's practical measuring. This is set in contrast with the 'woman's pointed interruptions demanding attention to the narcissistic measures she is taking before a mirror. Aren't men and women like that?' asks Cavell (*Pitch*, p. 152). He sees in this opening scene an exposé of two gendered versions of thinking – 'the woman's narcissistic, erotically imaginative far beyond the man's worldliness; the man's at once expansive and constricted, self-congratulatory and blind' (*ibid.*). *I detect another line of gendering in Cavell's text. Skeptical male narcissism betrays the desire 'to remain in control of his answers, a desire that makes his answers echoes'* (*Pitch*, p. 146). *The woman, however, abandons herself both to the pain of not being in control of words in a world that is not hers and to the* jouissance *of receiving words from beyond herself. Male skepticism leads to a situation of painful conventionalism, where words are to be controlled and only echoes can be heard; female narcissism, on the other hand, allows for mourning*

and for creativity. In sum, in my reading of Cavell's economy of gender, feminine performance of narcissism provides healing for the male skeptical worry. Again, the woman is both victim and savior of men in Cavell's vision.

The educator's education

Whom, however, does all this educate? Whose anxiety of exposure and of separated connection are the movies meant to help overcome? We have already seen that in Cavell's writing the audience and the gaze of the camera is male. They are perceived not as always active or dominating, to be sure, but as male nevertheless. And this male audience is be seduced by 'the feminine' powers of exposure of film. This points to the idea that the comedies and the melodramas are educational tools for a (heterosexual) male audience. Let me recall how Cavell describes who is in charge in these films: 'In *Lady Eve* it is the woman who directs the action (as it is in *Bringing Up Baby*); the man is her audience, gulled and entranced as a film audience is apt to be. In *It Happened One Night* it is the man who directs, and the woman is not so much his audience as his star' (*POH*, p. 107).

Women are not thought of as audiences, but rather as stars, which means as persons who are exposed to the gaze of a male audience. Women are not there to see but to be seen. The position of the woman on screen, however, is a powerful position. As mentioned before, Cavell invites us to imagine that these woman are empowered to 'instruct the camera in its ways of looking – to, say, the extent that men can be instructed' (*POH*, p. 125). The women on the screen, who within the world of the movie are cast as Emersonian younger friends, become the older friend for those viewing the film. The audience *in front of the movies* is perceived as male and as passive or 'victimized' by the seductive power of women. I have already mentioned that Cavell interprets the experience of viewing a film as victimization. This experience reflects 'mythologically as what Nietzsche calls, in *The Gay Science*, action at a distance, which is his interpretation of a man's reaction to women (or, as I suppose, of the relation of the masculine to the feminine side of human character). This proposes a mythology, in a word, of the seductiveness of film; of art, therefore, to the extent that film is art' (*POH*, p. 184). In my reading, the women on film and the female stars become the therapeutic seducers who seduce the (masculine) viewer/reader away from his neurotic fixations or his conventionality. *The world of movies* or *the world of the opera* provokes the question 'Aren't men and women like that?' (*Pitch*, p. 152). This question is linked to an uncertainty whether we are dealing here with characteristics of 'maleness itself,' or of masculinity as it 'has been defined, or deformed, in our culture' (*CT*, p. 117). Together these questions engender awareness that 'the woman's creation will be completed, furthered, only with the man's' (*ibid.*). The experience of seeing movies or operas provides therefore a first step in the creation of the new man by seducing the audience away from culturally conventionalized and conventionalizing maleness.

The new male philosopher

The man has to be seduced away from his desire *not* to be exposed to public view, that is, to the knowing gaze of another. Therefore it makes sense that Cavell writes that the central male problematic is captured in the 'philosophical self-torment whose shape is skepticism' (*Pitch*, p. 132). Given the above discussion of Desdemona's knowledge, we can now say more precisely that the man has to be seduced away from his desire not to be exposed to the knowing view of *his other*. And in Cavell's heterosexual landscape of gender this other is the woman. In the readings of the movies it became clear that 'exposure' is a female trait in Cavell's gender symbolism. Women are used to being exposed. They know what it means. Hence, it is seems natural for Cavell to equate accepting exposure with embracing 'femininity.' In skepticism, the male 'philosopher wants and wants not to exempt himself from the closet of privacy, wants and wants not to become intelligible, expressive, exposed' (*ibid.*). In 'Postscript (1989)' Cavell interprets this closet of privacy as a place 'not of the man's keeping of his unknown secret but of his containing of the woman's secret knowledge of him,' more precisely, 'the feminine voice that the male philosopher is refusing to let out, say acknowledge' (*CT*, p. 187). Cavell invites us to think that this feminine voice is a 'tone' that man is capable of, yet one that he has to own (as part of his attainable self). It is the tone of 'response and of satisfaction, as opposed to his voice of debts (accounts, consequences) and of orders (demands, compulsions)' (*CT*, p. 189). To my mind, we encounter here again the already-mentioned opposition between male practicality and female narcissism. Responsiveness and satisfaction point to the female star's *jouissance*, a satisfaction received from beyond herself. Accounts and consequences point to the order of things (what counts), to the world as it is attained or achieved. But the demands and compulsions point to rules, to the fantasy that, for example, language can speak for itself:

> The man's refusal of his woman's voice, to let it out (not to speak in it, necessarily, however that might sound, but to listen to it, to know how it sounds), creates the sense that his words, his appeals to the outside, are not *answered*. To compensate for this arid silence, you might wish to construct a theory of language that explains that language 'must' lack, or is by nature thwarted from – at least an ironic half of the time – the power or reference. [*CT*, p. 191]

Woman as transforming absence

The Emersonian female In sum, Cavell interprets the 'absence of woman in the space of philosophy' as an absence of voice – a voice that is needed for language to be possible. The creativity of new projections evokes the mourning connected to the homelessness of language. Such new projections are only possible if the language user risks being beyond herself. Craving for rules or for a voiceless language implies craving to speak outside of the context of claiming (and thus outside of responsibility). These cravings reflect for Cavell a desire to keep the female voice absent. *The feminine body bears the risk of aversion, which lies in Cavell's philosophy at the heart of the continuously needed and dreaded transformation of language, self, and*

society. In the symbolism of Cavell's Freudian Emersonianism, woman bears the responsibility for change. Man bears the responsibility for continuity:

> I have written as though the woman's demand for a voice, for a language, for attention to, and the power to enforce attention to, her own subjectivity, say to her difference of existence, is expressible as a response to an Emersonian demand for thinking. I suppose that what for me authorizes this supposition is my interpretation of Emerson's authorship as itself responding to his sense of the *right* to such a demand as already voiced on the feminine side, requiring a sense of thinking as reception (Emerson also says an 'impressionableness'), and as bearing of pain, which the masculine in philosophy would avoid. (That is not a straight-forward empirical observation but a conceptual claim. If it is wrong it is not so much false as wrongheaded). To overcome this avoidance is essential to Emerson's hopes for bringing an American difference to philosophy. [*CT*, p. 221]

The woman's demand for a voice is expressible as a response to the demand for thinking because this demand for a voice is already present on the 'feminine' side of the human character. Let me flag here that this passage seems to assume a distinction between women (and men) and 'the feminine' (or 'masculine') side of our shared human character. At another point, Cavell writes about the feminine voice: 'the answer and gratification, of that voice, released, might be sought on the body of a female as well as of a male' (*CT*, p. 192).

Now, it is important to note that this symbolism of the Emersonian female operates not only in the world of films or operas, but also in Cavell's analysis of the transformation of the world in front of the opera or movies. This world in front of the screen or stage – 'our' world – is in many aspects a place where women are barred from having a voice. Let me recall what Cavell wrote about women and immigrants:

> [T]he position of women is neither that of exiles nor of immigrants: unlike the immigrant, the woman's problem is not one of not belonging but one of belonging, but only on the wrong terms; unlike the exile, the woman is not between two different cultures but is at odds with the one in which she was born, is roughly in the process of transfiguring into one that does not exist, one as it were still in confinement. [*CT*, p. 213]

It strikes me that the heterosexual male world in which we (heterosexual or allosexual men and women) currently live is well described by Cavell's interpretation of the fate of Paula in *Gaslight*. The one person who defines reality to her, her husband, deprives her 'of words, of her right to words, of her own voice' (*CT*, p. 57). Her reality-defining husband makes Paula ashamed of her own voice, her own desires; and he rejects her desire for innocence and companionship. Being at a loss for words, these women are condemned to a structural form of madness. This is 'an isolation so extreme as to portray and partake of madness, a state of utter incommunicability, as if before the possession of speech' (*CT*, p. 17). This maddening state of incommunicability can be performed as either silence or as hyper-expressiveness: 'A certain theatricality is the sign of an inability to mean, to get our meaning across.' Such theatrical performance 'comes across to us by understanding this desperation, figuring our hidden screams, and then understanding us despite ourselves, despite our inexpressiveness, the poverty and pathos of all expression' (*CT*, p. 40). In this hyper-

expressiveness women are 'searching for the power of a word when the conditions of a language have been lost. We might say that the word would have to become absolutely expressive, as with a metaphysical voice' (*CT*, p. 42).

Let me note again what I see as the difference between the male skeptic's melancholia, and the female loss of voice. Despite the fact that both experience a situation in which words fail them, this experience has different origins. In the male case, the loss of voice is rooted in an unwillingness to be exposed. In the female case, the capacity to expose herself leads to her loss of voice. Consequently, in Cavell's gender symbolism women are burdened by the demands for transformation of a society that already drives them into the madness of inexpressiveness. Cavell states that singing as madness, as 'expression of the absolute inexpressiveness of the voice, of its failure to make itself heard, to become intelligible ... seems to be reserved to the women of opera' (*Pitch*, p. 140). Hence, we have to be aware of the difference between feminine and masculine inexpressiveness. 'Intuitive differences between the untellable and the unspeakable, let alone the ineffable, should alert us to the different causes for wordlessness, different relations to (in)expressiveness,' writes Cavell elsewhere (*CT*, p. 160).

Cavell's symbolism of the female/woman In Cavell's readings, woman is symbolized as the site of 'unknowable secrets' (*CT*, p. 189). We are already familiar with the theme that the man wants to know that which the woman knows (and that he fears that knowledge, because she knows him as one who is desired and hence as passive or exposed). In this line of thought, the man desires to know the woman's desire. The wish to access a woman's knowledge or desire is, according to Cavell, both at the origin of psychoanalysis and of cinema. Reflecting briefly on Lacan's 'God and the *Jouissance* of ~~The~~ Woman,' and 'A Love Letter,' Cavell describes what the man wants to know about the woman's desire: 'is her satisfaction real and is it caused by me?' (*CT*, p. 103). Cavell reads Lacan's statement 'I believe in the *jouissance* of the woman in so far as it is something more'[39] as expressing an article of faith:

> So he [Lacan] may be taken as saying: What there is (any longer?) of God, or of the concept of the beyond, takes place in relation to the woman. It matters to me that I cannot assess the extent or direction (outward or inward) of Lacan's (mock?) heroism, or (mock) apostlehood here, since something like this belief is in fact what I say works itself out, with gruesome eloquence, in the case of Othello, who enacts Descartes's efforts to prove that he is not alone in the universe by placing a finite, feminine other in the position assigned by Descartes to God. [*CT*, p. 102]

Recalling what Cavell has said about the satisfaction of Greta Garbo who is the emblem of the unknown woman, we can further analyze the connection between the unknown, *jouissance*, and absence. Cavell calls to mind one of Garbo's most famous postures with a man. She looks 'beyond or through him, as if in an absence (a distance from him, from the present), hence as to declare that this man, while

39 Jacques Lacan, 'God and the Jouissance of ~~The~~ Woman,' and 'A Love Letter,' in Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchel, (eds), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne* (New York: Norton, 1982), pp. 137–48 and pp. 149–61, at p. 147.

the occasion of her passion, is surely not its cause' (*CT*, p. 106). Elsewhere Cavell associates the woman in her isolation with the absent or the beyond: 'Her relation to the transcendent [is] grounded in a cosmic symbology of light and darkness, of enclosure and the imagination of freedom' (*CT*, p. 37). Further, the diva is 'occupying a visible world in which to be discovered and in the same breath to be invoking an invisible world from which to be heard' (*CT*, p. 38). Finally, Cavell juxtaposes the idea of a *deus absconditus* with the 'concluding position of the women of the unknown woman melodramas, which I earlier named structural madness (I might say symbolic, as opposed to imaginary and to real), [a position which is] now associated with an incommunicability of the transcendent' (*CT*, p. 43).[40] Female inexpressiveness (which points to the 'untellable' and to that for which there are no words yet) is associated in Cavell's symbolic of gender to the 'ineffable' and to that which is beyond (cf. *CT*, p. 160).

The Gender of Skepticism

The equation of the 'feminine' with 'the untellable' leads deeper into the conundrum of the gendered nature of skepticism: if fear of releasing the ('feminine') voice of absence (or of the beyond) within our human character is the issue philosophy expresses through philosophical skepticism, then skepticism performs indeed a human problem. In 'Psychoanalysis and Cinema,' Cavell writes 'to lose knowledge of the human possibility of skepticism means to lose knowledge of the human' (*CT*, p. 94). If we assume, however, that skepticism is a 'male affair' (*Pitch*, p. 169), this sentence should say, 'to lose knowledge of the male possibility of skepticism means to lose knowledge of the human (heterosexual) male's violence against women.' Given the fact that the skeptic's worry is linked to male violence, this rendering of Cavell's sentence rings true, and it would fit with Cavell's awareness for rupture and violence in human association. In this reading, the problem of skepticism is one of patriarchal maleness in our current social order. Skepticism as a male issue can only be overcome by the creation of the 'feminine man, a man who is also out to transfigure patriarchal power' (*CT*, p. 172). Yet, as we have seen the creation of this man depends in Cavell's picture on the willingness of concrete women to expose their bodies in aversion to those patriarchal powers. Hence, actual women are called to perform the deed of salvation and therefore to risk being caught up in the structural madness of inexpressiveness. At the same time, the notion of the 'feminine' man itself rests on the symbolism of 'the feminine' as absence. This however is a symbolic structure that contributes to the inexpressiveness of actual women. Cavell is well aware that this symbolic link between 'the feminine', absence, transcendence, and *jouissance* enables the violence of the Othellos of our world against the Desdemonas in their world (see above, and *CT*, p. 102).

In sum, we can detect in Cavell an oscillation between gender as symbolic order (call it 'the masculine/feminine' side of our character) and gender as political

40 In another inflection Cavell links religious fanaticism (the desire for the unknowable that has not yet happened to the human being) as female (cf. *CT*, p. 194).

reality (call it the relationship between men and women in the community we create and inhabit). For the task of understanding skepticism as a *human* worry (as revealing something about our shared humanity), Cavell uses the terminology of 'the feminine' and 'masculine' side of our character. Yet, this psychological terminology presupposes the link between 'the feminine' and 'absence.' This connection itself contributes to very male violence against women in our *polis*. One version of this male violence is the skeptic's attempt to appropriate what a woman thinks. This murderous male desire for knowledge can only be overcome with the help of the vision of 'the feminine' man as the attainable self of the male skeptic. In this vision, his next self (his beyond, his other) is feminine. Cavell's therapeutic political vision therefore presupposes a psychological understanding of our human character in terms of symbolic femininity and masculinity; yet, this very symbolism is politically implicated in the silencing of women. [41]

In the next chapter I propose a way in which we can escape this harmful oscillation between the therapeutic symbolic gender and violent political use of gender. I suggest that we recast the tension between absence/beyond and presence. I argue that by recasting this tension in our mutual creation of self, we can better understand the core of the skeptical worry. More importantly, such a recasting can contribute to breaking a symbolic framework in which woman becomes the placeholder for all otherness and where, as Alice Jardine suggests, 'any movement into alterity is a movement into ... female space.'[42] When recasting absence and presence, I take seriously the narcissism not only of the diva or the unknown woman, but also of the women in the Comedies of Remarriage. I read the – according to Cavell – 'narcissistic' reluctance of the women in the comedies as expressing an awareness of the potential for violence. Such violence is implied in the idea that we have to create each other in the image of our imagination as closed and finite. There is wisdom in the wish of these women to hold onto their status as absent goddesses, rather than to endorse the status of flesh and blood women (since this flesh and blood is created by the limited words of men) (cf. *POH*, p. 140). I read the narcissistic somatizations of the female movie stars and the narcissistic exuberance of the opera divas as important signs of awareness. These traits testify to our need and capacity to create ourselves in the fleeting images of our infinitely open imagination. To the degree that the skeptical worry is fueled by a fear of exposure to *that* imagination, it demands a religious answer, or better, a reworking of our religious imagination and of our vision of what counts as religious. This should be an answer that deals with our ways of imagining the creative and feared nextness. Not being but becoming is the issue. To the degree that Cavell's skeptic expresses a fear of abandonment to 'that which is beyond myself,' he raises indeed a human question. But it is a

41 In the oscillation between woman and man on the one hand and 'the masculine' and feminine side of our human character on the other, Cavell repeats Lacan's frequent oscillation between penis and phallus (cf. Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 133–56.

42 Alice Jardine, 'Gynesis,' in H. Adams; L. Searle (eds), *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), pp. 560–70, p. 567. For Jardine the female space is the space of the unconscious, understood as outside of the male conscious subject.

question demanding a religious answer in one form or another. This should not surprise us. We have already seen that, in the Freudian picture, religion and 'the feminine' are connected. Both the woman, and 'the feminine' man, are weakened by an 'insufficient respect for reality' or for duty and reason.[43] To my mind, religious believers are on the right track when they embrace a specific kind of weakness – namely, the fact that our next self is beyond our control. It is true in our current economy of gender that this experience assumes different valences for men then for women. In certain contexts, it might be more familiar to women. Nevertheless, envisioning a self as bordering the beyond is central for the project of philosophical self-awareness. In contrast to the weak believer, the skeptic seems driven by a desire to control that which is absent, next, or beyond. In previous chapters, we have seen how the skeptic attempts to cope with his situation. He tries to control the projections of language by employing criteria as rules. Or he tries to manage the nextness of other minds by holding to the idea of privacy. This desire to control creates a position of both isolation and imagined sovereignty. This theme of control is further inflected into the desire either to control a woman's voice or to silence her. It is important, however, to maintain the central idea that what and who we are as human beings is not simply given but attained, and attained for mutuality. Garbo's absence and the diva's song generate idiosyncratic personas. They are resources for creating human beings that model various possibilities for human life. In their humanity they stand for us. Thus, the task of recasting the skeptical problem in terms of absence is to show how we can in fact incorporate knowledge of the beyond into our self-creation as human beings. How can we become divine for each other and in mutuality with one another? This task is similar to that which David Crownfield describes, when he comments on Jonte-Pace's response to Kristeva. Jonte-Pace wishes us to overcome the link between absence and gender in Kristeva. Crownfield notes that if abjection is rooted in the bodily separation from the mother, misogyny

> ... and a maternal/abject covering over the issue of death would seem inescapable ... If there is a way beyond here, it might lie in consideration of what Kristeva in *Tales of Love* calls 'the zero degree of subjectivity.' At the originary site of the subject, there is a gap, a void ... If nothingness is not to be modeled on mother's absence, it comes back home to the central nothingness of subjectivity itself. In a sense, it is the necessity to represent nothingness as *something else* in order to maintain the cover over the central void that founds the abjection of mother. Jonte-Pace's desire to get beyond that abjection is thus aimed at the core of our resistance, our own nothingness.[44]

43 Judith Van Herik, *Freud on Femininity and Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 192.

44 David R. Crownfield, 'Inter-text 1,' in David R. Crownfield (ed.), *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva. Religion, Woman, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 23–6, pp. 24f.

Chapter 5

Beyond the Philosopher's Fear
Nostalgia for Mothers and Other Origins

Neighboring the Beyond

The previous chapters treated three issues: first, that the skeptic's fear of exposure is in fact a fear of exposure to 'nextness' or to 'the beyond'; that is, to something uncontrollable. Our language, our inner life, and our participation in community involve negotiating this uncontrolled and uncontrollable next. What the skeptic fears and denies is the resultant truth that 'his' subjectivity borders and is made possible only through something beyond his control. Second, 'the feminine' or 'the woman' becomes the stand-in for this creative 'next' or 'beyond,' the site of the skeptic's fears. Third, Cavell's therapeutic proposal suggests that the male philosophers release their feminine voice. Yet this symbolism of 'the feminine' echoes with religious undertones, particularly in Cavell's identification of the salvific role of the diva. Implied in the discourse around the feminine voice are allusions to a lost religious vision of our origins as human beings.

Cavell's treatment of skepticism therefore points toward a *religious* question – a question that lies at the heart of both the masculine philosophical fear and of Cavell's own Freudian and Emersonian treatments. But what kind of religious problem is this? In addition, if a religious concern motivates both philosophical anxieties and Cavell's own project, what kind of religious therapy is in turn needed to satisfactorily address the issue of the beyond?

Addressing these questions necessitates untangling the web of allusions that connects the ideas of 'absence,' 'beyond' and 'the woman' in the work of Cavell. I will go about this in three steps: first, I will further follow the imagery of 'the beyond.' Once we see more clearly how Cavell envisions the associations of 'absence,' 'beyond,' and 'woman,' we can understand better what role 'mourning' plays in his treatment for skepticism. Secondly, I will explore the psychoanalytic roots of Cavell's connection between 'absence' and 'the woman.' To phrase this exploration in Cavellian terms: what makes theses associations natural for Cavell? In other words, what is the intellectual framework within which the woman becomes the stand-in for a simultaneously threatening and life-giving 'beyond'? Thus, my turn to Cavell's psychoanalytic roots is meant to uncover not biographical idiosyncrasies. Rather, I understand Cavell as saying 'these are the connections that come naturally to me, don't they do the same to you?'

To analyze these connections, I will bring Cavell into dialogue with Julia Kristeva. Her work will allow us to explore the Freudian heritage in Cavell even as we problematize the gender stereotypes present in the writing of the founder

of psychoanalysis. Central for this project of critical inheritance is Kristeva's methodology of exposing the lacunae (or silences) in the Freudian narrative of how subjectivity and language come into being. Her fine attunement to the Freudian texts produces something akin to an Emersonian reading of aversion that can inhabit and appropriate words that were not meant to be hospitable for women. She quotes without quoting.

Let me mention however one important caveat. Kristeva has a penchant for gestures of grand historical summation, as, in *Black Sun*, when she talks about the 'Western tradition' in the singular. Rather than follow this overgeneralization, I hope to suggest that Kristeva's work is a monument to the varied myths, counter-myths, and losses involved in many modern fantasies of self and language. I read her as both analyzing *and representing* a self-understanding of a multifaceted Western mythology *at a particular point in time*. This moment is characterized by, in her words, the 'crisis of values [that] shook up the nineteenth century' creating a 'true melancholy experience of man's symbolic resources' (Kristeva, 1989, p. 171).[1] Kristeva's work monumentalizes, that is, it reflects on and mirrors the fissures and struggles of a specific modern subjectivity. Read as an expository text of influential myths and counter-myths that modern twentieth-century Western intellectual culture narrates about the self, Kristeva's works enable us historically and culturally to locate the Freudian entanglement of absence, death, salvation, the mother, and the divine.

Implied in Cavell's psychoanalytic reading of the skeptic's violence against women (together with the desire for sublime idealization of the woman as savior) is a Freudian ambivalence toward the body of the mother. In the psychoanalytic imagination of the self, the mother's body must be 'abjected' so that the child can attain language and self. Hence, violence against a particular woman's body undergirds language. Kristeva will help us understand that the consequences of this originating violence are different for the male child than for the daughter. Yet even insofar as skepticism is experienced differently by each gender, it is a human and not only a male problem. In this, as I will argue, all human beings share the skeptical fear.

More importantly, this psychoanalytic reading can explain why in Cavell's world, the woman is both the savior and the victim of skepticism. According to the psychoanalytic schema, the skeptical violence against a woman's body becomes unavoidable. Kristeva's intervention can also provide a clearer vision of how to disrupt this link between language and violent rejection of women's bodies. A strategy that misplaces the originating matricidal violence onto female bodies in general both expresses and denies the matricidal wishes that reside at the origins of language and self. Consequently, we have to disrupt the mythological links that connect the 'maternal function' of the Thing (that is to be abjected) and the female body of this or that individual mother. In other words, we have to free the female body as it is imagined in the role of being both victim and savior of mankind. To do so, we have to go beyond philosophy and probe Cavell and Kristeva's work for the onset of a new religious imagination.

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1 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 100.

As we will see in the third and final part of this chapter we find in Kristeva's work numerous passages alluding to religious language and that imagine the 'mother' as a placeholder for a lost divine thing. Kristeva's strategy is to fill the void left by the loss of what she considers the loss of religious discourse about our origins with a renewed attention to mythologies of the mother. She is careful to state that 'the mother' is 'of her own sex,' so that we don't confuse 'the mother' with woman. Despite this disclaimer, her strategy consists of replacing language about transcendent origins with language about 'the mother.' This replacement does not disrupt the link between the maternal origin (that needs to be abjected) and the female body of individual mothers. To my mind, it instead disingenuously reaffirms this link, thereby leaving us with violence against women at the heart of the modern myths and imaginations of self and language.

Given this discussion, I will argue that the religious issue that fuels the skeptic's violence against women is generated by a *specific question of origin*. The beyond that the skeptic fears and tries to control is not related to the future (for example, the future or a next self, to use Emersonian language). Rather the deadly fear that possesses the skeptic is related to the story of our uncontrollable origins. The heirs of the mythicized Freudian and post-Cartesian visions of self (like those of Othello's violence) fear the uncontrollable origins that are simultaneously part of ourselves and that are beyond ourselves. To account for the gendered violence of its discourse, philosophy has to address and acknowledge this fear of the particular death in our past. Overcoming this fear will however imply finding a new religious imagination that can express the pain and the joy of becoming human.

Day and night

In terms of *the functioning of language*, our exposure in language to the 'uncontrollable next' is denied through a philosophical fantasy in which our going on in language, that is, our next step, is controlled through rules. In terms of *possessing* language, this feared exposure is denied by the philosophical fantasy of privacy in which my exposure to another is controlled. In terms of *desire*, this vulnerability is denied through the fantasy of possessing the other, that is, of controlling the desires of 'my' other (which for the heterosexual man is 'his' woman).

Weaving together the different strands of Cavell's thought about language and the possession thereof with his symbolism of gender clarifies the underlying religious issue. We will see that Cavell's notion of the 'feminine' man (or of the philosopher who releases his feminine voice) points to a vision of the human self as bordering 'the beyond' and hence as becoming. More precisely, like the diva, the Cavellian self is expanded between 'a visible world in which to be discovered' on the one hand and 'an invisible world from which to be heard' on the other (*CT*, p. 38). The world from which she can be heard is invoked by the diva's song and it lasts just as long as her breath (cf. *Pitch*, p. 144). Thus, there is an important temporal dimension implied in Cavell's vision of 'becoming.' To explore this let me mention what Cavell writes about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This comedy

> ... is built from the idea that the public world of day cannot resolve its conflicts apart from resolutions in the private forces of the night. For us mortals, fools of finitude, this therapy must occur by way of remembering something, awakening to something, and by forgetting something, awakening from something. [*POH*, p. 142][2]

I take from this passage the idea that we should think about the time in which we become human not only in terms of *quantity*, that is in terms of duration as a prerequisite for our journey on something like Whitman's 'open road' (*CT*, p. 142). Rather, we should think about this time likewise in terms of *quality*, namely as a fusion of the time of the day and of the night.

Cavell identifies the public world of day as a 'world of consequences' (*POH*, p. 143). I propose to say that the daytime sphere is one of counting and differentiation, of deciding what does and does not belong. It is the world of scarcity, of controlled resources, and especially the world of the economy of words. If the connection of the world of day and counting is apt then the world of day is also the world of recounting, that is, the world of narrative. This *is* what we call a man, or *this* is how these few strikes can be a house (this is the door, this is the window, etc.). Implied in narrative and in counting is an awareness of responsibility (this is what *we* call a man). My words and my tales count. The private forces of the night, on the other hand, point to a world of dreams, imagination, and desire (*POH*, p. 140). Yet, desire (as in Cavell's analysis of separation) relates to something that is not mine. What I desire is neither seamlessly available nor simply given as present and the desire for the other demands from me that I make myself present to her or him. In the world of the Comedies of Remarriage, couples mutually evoke this oneiric realm in order to ensure true marriage. Cavell notes that the couple achieves their true marriage only in 'isolation from the rest of society' (*POH*, p. 142). We can think of the auto-camp scene in *It Happened One Night* or of the fact that Jerry and Lucy in *The Awful Truth* achieve their reconciliation outside of the city. The resolutions of their quarrels happen in places in the country and at night (right before midnight to be precise). It is hard not to hear Freudian overtones in this appreciation of the night or of dreams and imagination. Let me draw attention, in particular, to the fact that both the therapeutic setting and the time of night are positioned in separation from the world of society and rules. It is key for the psychoanalytic process that the patient be separated from the forces of society (both within and outside of herself) so that she can access her own forces of imagination and association. In this isolation we can free our imagination to think and feel in creative aversion. These comedies do more than emphasize the importance of night. They also present us with a dreamscape aimed at seducing the audience with their fantastic luxury and bruised happiness to 'entertain the possibility of such a world, one in which good dreams come true' (*ibid.*). The audience in the theater is positioned (like the couple) in separation from the outside world. We sit in a darkened room where the social markers of status or origin, race or gender are supposed to become invisible; and we are exposed to a

2 Awakening to and from something evokes Cavell's reading of Thoreau's pun on morning and mourning (cf. *IQO*, p. 171). We have to awaken from (and mourn) an illusion of infinite sameness, and awaken to the awareness of separation in which desire is possible. The time for the collusion of morning and mourning is dawn.

dream world of imagination. In a way it is not the audience member's imagination since he or she did not write the script. Yet, the work appeals to the imagination by inviting the viewer to make this story his or her own and to entertain the idea that such a world of mutuality is possible. In melodrama, and more pronouncedly so in opera, the unknown woman invokes the dreamscape of her own inner theater, that is, of her world-less and wordless imagination. Not only is the world of the opera isolated from the world outside, but also is the diva isolated from her world within the 'play' of the opera itself. She is not an immigrant but an alien. Again, change or the indictment of the present state of society and self comes through invocation of the time of night, the time of dreams.

Divorcing the world of night

If we look at the problem of skepticism's fear of exposure through the lens of 'absence' and the symbolism of day and night, we can see what engenders the skeptical problem. It is the philosopher's self-divorce from the world of night, the time that invokes 'the beyond,' and the sphere of imagination and dream. If the 'feminine philosopher' is one who releases his voice of 'absence,' then hope for philosophy lies in the embrace of night. Such a diagnosis of the skeptical problem demands that philosophy has to engage both our finitude as well as our exposure to 'nextness' or 'the beyond.'

This reading of day and night can be tested with the help of Cavell's understanding of the 'ordinary.' After all, it is the ordinary that the skeptic seems to avoid or flee. On first glance, it seems to make sense to assume that the ordinary as the daily is linked to the time of day. Particularly in his interpretation of the Comedies of Remarriage, Cavell stresses the role of the repetition of days. (Re)marriage is based for him on a 'willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday' (*IQO*, p. 178). It is wrong-headed to consider marriage to be predicated on the extraordinary. It is not the experience of a festival stretched out over a lifetime. Rather, marriage is based on the exchanges of ordinary verbal and non-verbal intercourse and on the consummation of ordinary or domestic things (like cooking, which in the comedies is a primarily male affair). Marriage, that is, our association in mutual intelligibility, is fueled not by an infinite, sumptuous banquet but by the quotidian food that is our words.

Cavell makes much the same point when he writes that

> ... something Emerson means by the common, the familiar, and the low is something I have meant, from the beginning to the end of my work I have so far accomplished, in my various defenses of proceeding in philosophy from ordinary language, from words of everyday life. [*SOW*, p. 143]

Nevertheless, the equivalence of the ordinary as daily with the time of day is problematic. This association seems to contrast the ordinary with fantasy and dream (or the extraordinary). Such a contrast would make no sense given Cavell's idea that the philosopher needs to release his voice that speaks of and from 'absence' and imagination. Instead, in the passages that Cavell interprets in the above-quoted

lines from *The Senses of Walden*, Emerson speaks about the presence of dreams in common and seemingly unspectacular places. Emerson writes:

> Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous. The dawn is my Assyria; the sunset and moonrise my Pathos, and unimaginable realms of faerie; broad noon shall be my England of the senses and the understanding; the night shall be my Germany of mystic philosophy and dreams. [From Emerson's essay 'Nature,' as quoted in *SOW*, p. 142]

In a self-reflexive mood, Cavell remarks that this passage strikes him as expressing the goal of his 'private life, the putting together of day and night, of body and soul' (*SOW*, p. 149). Remembering that the diva's transcendent voice throws into question her immanence, her having *this* body, we can see again the alignment of the invisible (voice) or 'the beyond,' with the time of night (cf. *CT*, p. 38). Thus, rather than seeing the ordinary (the daily and everyday) as linked to the world of the day, the world of consequences, rules and routines, *I wish to argue that we should see the ordinary or the common as the space that puts together day and night*. Let us consider here what Cavell says about a passage in 'The American Scholar' in which Emerson talks about 'the mean in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body' (quoted in *SOW*, p. 149). Cavell describes this passage as 'a list epitomizing what we may call the physiognomy of the ordinary' (*ibid.*). Borrowing Kierkegaard's words, Cavell goes on to argue that Emerson's account of the ordinary allows us to perceive 'the sublime in the everyday' (*SOW*, p. 150).

Without the capacity to see desire and imagination, in short without the ability to perceive the world of night in the everyday and the ordinary, 'one is bound to be blind to the poetry of film, to the sublimity of it' (*ibid.*). While this passage may speak to the ability of finding philosophical value in Hollywood productions, we can also find something deeper here. It is important to remember Cavell's statement that one of the powers of film is to make absence present. More specifically, the camera has the ability to make visible 'an otherwise invisible self,' an ability that Cavell characterizes as the power of the camera to reveal the 'feminine' side of the male characters (*POH*, p. 224). Film, like Emersonian writing, has the power of 'yoking of day and night' (*SOW*, p. 150).

Failing to present us to the invisible

We understand the philosophical point of film or of Emersonian writing only if we see it as a project of such yoking. The divorce of the time of night from the diurnal leads further to a shift in the experience of time, as we have seen in Cavell's interpretation of repetition in the comedies and in the melodrama. Let me recall the pertinent passage from his 'Psychoanalysis and Cinema':

> In [the] remarriage comedy ... repetitiveness is the field of inventiveness, improvisation, of the recurrence of time, open to a second chance; in ... melodrama time is transient, closed, and repetition signals death. [*CT*, p. 108]

If the common, the low, and the near is perceived without or sealed off from 'the next' and 'the beyond,' then the ordinary in its eternal repetition begets death. Such a world – a world only of day without night – strikes me like the world in which Debussy's Melisande is forced to live. This is a world of 'absolute unoriginality, in which, since nothing originates in any soul, there is nothing but suffering, however much vexed motion there may be in such a world' (*Pitch*, p. 166). If this is so, it is only because the temporal horizon in which original thought is produced – in which imagination stretches beyond the here and now – is the time of dream and of the night.

This separation therefore engenders a fantasy of the ordinary as a simple given. Here the ordinary is not experienced as the product of our imagination and not as an element in the process of becoming. Such a break-up involves also a vision of ordinary humanity as unoriginal, static, and given. The focus is on existence and not on becoming. Consequently, we fail to present ourselves to the invisible or absent underside (or 'yonder-side') of the ordinary or of humanity, that is, the space from which humanity is created and envisioned. My argument here hinges on a distinction between the absence of the attainable self and the absence of an unattainable self. Absence marks a context-dependent relation. Just as I cannot simply become whoever I want to be, what is next to me depends on where I stand. Not every possible self is attainable for me here and now.

Further, the divorce leads to an unqualified sense of absence and presence: the world, the ordinary, other minds, or our selves, are either there or not there. This unqualified sense of presence and absence undermines the nuanced relationship of 'neighboring.' According to Cavell this relationship emblematizes our being both endlessly separate from and endlessly connected to the world and our others – a relationship for which marriage is the most perspicuous representation. This relationship is nuanced because there is a sense in which the world (or my self or other) is separate from me, and absent to my controlling reach, or beyond me. Yet, at the same time, there is a sense in which we are inescapably connected. Undermining this nuanced relationship leads to a picture in which the world (or others or myself) is either *there*, present to the senses and accessible, or *gone*, beyond reach and retreating into absence.

As we have seen, the skeptic is correct in sensing (fearing/desiring) that there is a moment of absence in our relationship to the world, others, and ourselves. Cavell writes:

> *The Claim of Reason* suggests the moral of skepticism to be that the existence of the world and others in it is not a matter to be known, but one to be acknowledged. And now what emerges is that what is to be acknowledged is this existence as separate from me, as if gone from me. [*IQO*, p. 172]

However, the skeptic misconstrues this moment of absence in terms of unqualified absence. This misconstruction then leads to an attempt to force himself, the world, and others to be present in a similarly unqualified way, that is, untainted by separateness or absence. The skeptic focuses on attempting to secure existence. These attempts – born of the incapability to bear absence in presence – lead in their violence only to a further receding of the desired contact with the world, others, or the self.

We can now understand better why Cavell considers mourning as the appropriate therapy for this violence. Mourning is 'the path of accepting the loss of the world (you might say, accepting its loss of presence), accepting it as something that exists for you only in its loss (you might say its absence), or what presents itself as loss' (*IQO*, p. 172). This exercise of mourning should lead to a new morning in a Thoreauvian sense. And morning is, as Thoreau writes, 'when I am awake and there is dawn in me' (Walden, II, 14, as quoted in *SOW*, p. 5). Healing for the skeptic, and from the violence skepticism demands, calls for a remarriage of day and night, the weaving together of presence and absence into a unified experience not unlike that of dawn.

At the heart of Cavell's therapeutic proposal therefore lies a vision of a self that can only come to existence by 'yoking together.' 'Yoking,' however, presupposes splitting, and it strikes me as a metaphor for the ability to live with a split while acknowledging its pain *and* its possibilities. But how can we achieve this ability to live with such a split? And how can we mourn it? And what is the gendered and religious nature of these questions? To more fully address these issues let us now turn to Cavell's Freudian roots. In the next part of this chapter we will also consider the work of Julia Kristeva in greater depth. Deeply in tune with Freud's heritage, Kristeva's careful listening to the absences in the Freudian mythologies will allow us to re-imagine the archeology of language and the Western self that underlies Cavell's analytic and therapeutic project.

Kristeva's Voice

Freudian undertones

The symbolism of the female voice as absent or of the woman as the unknown and transcendent has deep roots in the tradition of Freudian thought. As we have seen, in Cavell's writing the position of the female part of the male–female binary is characterized by identification or association with the absence side in the absence–presence binary; with transcendence in the transcendence–immanence binary; and with the inexpressible in the inexpressible–expressible binary. Turning now to a discussion of psychoanalytic thought, I will explore what these *structural* stresses of Cavell's symbolism of gender imply for women.

In 'Situating Kristeva Differently. Psychoanalytic Readings of Women and Religion,' Diane Jonte-Pace traces through the works of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva the structural linkage between the woman, the absent, God and religion.[3] With her help, we can more actively expose the Freudian undertones in Cavell's work on gender.

Jonte-Pace argues that, in the Freudian project, 'woman' became a placeholder for that which is other, absent, beyond the limits of language, or divine. Summarizing her readings of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva she writes: 'In spite of radically different understandings of woman, these theorists "engender religion" as feminine.' She

3 Diane Jonte-Pace, 'Situating Kristeva Differently. Psychoanalytic Readings of Women and Religion,' in David R. Crownfield (ed.), *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 1–22.

argues that the structural homologizing of religion and woman is established through the idea of 'absence, formulated as non-being in the discourse of religion, and formulated as difference or female lack in the discourse of gender.' According to her reading, fear of the woman (or aversion of the woman, to use Cavellian terminology,) is therefore linked with the fear of death.[4] In the *Freudian picture*, the daughter is fated to remain dependent on her father, preventing her from attaining the skills necessary to renounce 'libidinal wishes, unconsciously motivated illusions, and dependence.'[5] Thus, she is incapable of reason. For Freud, 'the homology of woman and religion is based on a linkage of daughters and religious believers. Believers are like daughters; gods are like fathers; and sons are non-believers.'[6] Women in their lack of reason are more prone to hold onto infantile consolatory believes originating from the unconscious. Religion as a form of wishful thinking keeps us in infantile relationships of dependence to a fictitious deity. Van Herik remarks that for Freud, the feminine man, the believer, and the woman share the same characteristics: a weak super-ego, a poor moral sense, and an 'insufficient respect for reality,' duty and reason.[7] *Lacan*, however, maintains the 'congruence of femininity and religion by associating woman with God even while denying the ontological reality of both.'[8] Jonte-Pace refers to the famous passage in his lectures 'God and the *Jouissance* of ~~The~~ Woman':

> There is no such a thing as The woman, where the definite article stands for the universal. There is no such thing as The woman since of her essence ... she is not all ... There is woman only as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words ... It none the less remains that if she is excluded by the nature of things, it is precisely that in being not all, she has, in relation to what the phallic function designates of *jouissance*, a supplementary *jouissance*.[9]

According to Jonte-Pace's reading of this passage, the satisfaction of woman is beyond the phallus. In this inexpressiveness, the woman, for Lacan, is homologized with God through her otherness: 'the unmoved mover, the supreme being ... is situated in the place, the opaque place of the *jouissance* of the Other – that Other which if she existed the woman might be. It is insofar as her *jouissance* is radically Other that the woman has a (greater) relation to God.'[10] The radical otherness of both God and woman places both outside of language. Note, however, that this is an otherness that is produced by definition. *Woman is defined as other*. This idea dovetails with Cavell's observation that 'the woman of the unknown melodramas is beginning to loom – as a figure subjected to, produced by, a mode of reading, or non-reading' (*CT*, p. 157). Another important point is Lacan's connection between the

4 Jonte-Pace, 'Situating Kristeva Differently,' p. 2.

5 *Ibid*., p. 3.

6 *Ibid*., p. 4.

7 Van Herik, *Freud and Femininity and Faith*, p. 192.

8 Jonte-Pace, 'Situating Kristeva Differently,' p. 6.

9 Jacques Lacan, 'God and the Jouissance of ~~The~~ Woman,' in Rose and Mitchell (eds), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, pp. 137–48.

10 *Ibid*., p. 153.

man's immortal soul and the denigration of woman. The man's soul can only exist if the woman is differentiated from it.[11] 'Woman's denigration, in other words, is the precondition for man's belief in his own soul,' comments Jonte-Pace.[12] We have seen how for Cavell 'the feminine' voice has the capacity to mourn the transience of time. By contrast, the male philosopher seems incapable of expressing this mourning. It is the female side of the human character that can embrace finitude and let go of the desire for infinity.

The connections between woman, religion and God are even more numerous and complex in Kristeva's thought. In her essay 'Stabat Mater,' for example, Kristeva links motherhood with death/non-death in the cult of the Virgin Mary in whom generativity 'is split from sin, from sex and from death.'[13] In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva situates purity rituals and the notion of impurity as a reaction to the body of the mother as 'abject': 'The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother ... risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being.'[14] The abject as a 'condensation of all fears,' is simultaneously linked for Kristeva with the sacred.[15] In Kristeva's lectures on religion, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, Jonte-Pace finds a repetition of this pattern. Here Kristeva sees – contrary to Lacan's denial of pre-discursive reality – an early psychic stage of maternal and succoring love and protection as the basis of the infant's development of self and language. She describes this stage in terms of Plato's *chora* as 'an ancient, mobile, unstable receptacle, prior to the One, to the father, and even to the syllable, metaphorically suggesting something nourishing and maternal.'[16] Interpreting Augustine's comparison between Christian faith in God and an infant suckling at the mother's breast, Kristeva writes: 'what we have here is a fusion with a breast that is, to be sure, succoring, nourishing, loving, protective, but transposed from the mother's body to an invisible agency located in another world.'[17]

Jonte-Pace sees a notion of feminine absence as the anchor of the homologization between religion and woman. By naming the unnamable absence 'woman,' this beyond is seemingly controlled; yet simultaneously this move 'associates woman with the unnamable, increasing our terror of her.'[18]

In the Freudian schema, woman is defined more specifically as absence of (male) genitalia: 'In the psychic economy of the male, the female is castrated and castrating, an embodiment of absence, frightening to men because she arouses castration

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11 cf. *Ibid*., p. 156.

12 Jonte-Pace, 'Situating Kristeva Differently,' p. 7.

13 *Ibid*., p. 9. Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater,' in Julia Kristeva, *Histoires d'amour* (Paris: Denoël, 1983), pp. 225–47. English translation in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 160–86.

14 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay of Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 64.

15 Jonte-Pace, 'Situating Kristeva Differently,' p. 10.

16 Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 5.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

18 Jonte-Pace, 'Situating Kristeva Differently,' p. 15.

anxiety.'[19] For Freud, presence is male, yet always threatened by female absence. Male maturity entails the willing embrace of absence. Jonte-Pace summarizes:

> Just as the child throws the spool recapitulating maternal absence in the game of 'fort-da' ... just as the autonomous individual in the utopian world of *Future of an Illusion* abandons the illusion of eternal life; similarly, the mature male renounces willingly the false presence (beliefs, illusions, attachments) that he will inevitably lose. Renunciation represents a kind of absence in presence, an acceptance or affirmation of absence. It is a choice of death in the face of the inevitable, a 'carrying back of death into life.'[20]

Whereas Lacan locates woman and God in otherness and absence and lack, Kristeva grounds the connection between woman and religion 'most explicitly in death.'[21] Since death cannot be represented, it is displaced onto a number of symbolic representations. In *Black Sun* she writes that the most important of these displacements of death is woman:

> The unrepresentable nature of death was linked with that other unrepresentable – original abode but also last resting place of dead souls in the beyond – which for mythical thought is constituted by the female body ... The horror of castration underlying the anguish of death undoubtedly accounts in large part for the universal partnership with death of the penis-lacking feminine.[22]

At the same time Kristeva thinks that the symbolic and eroticized connection of woman and death helps to keep 'the melancholic away from suicidal self-destruction.'[23] The mechanism of this protection is sublimation, according to Kristeva: 'By representing that unsymbolized as a maternal object, a source of sorrow and nostalgia, but of ritual representation as well, the melancholy imagination sublimates it and gives itself a protection against collapsing into a-symbolism.'[24] Jonte-Pace concludes:

> Maternal absence, matricide, and castration (absence as female), are negated in the religious promise of presence through eternal life and paternal love (presence as male). The psychoanalytic theories examined here have disclosed a complex weaving of life and death, male and female, presence and absence, in a process that leads to the internalization of the image of woman as death.[25]

Furthering Jonte-Pace's thought, I will argue that for Cavell and Kristeva the desire for a religiously authenticated existence (or presence) conceals matricidal impulses including the skeptic's violence against female bodies. Both the longing for authenticated existence and the disappointed diagnosis of its absence lead to a confrontation with the problem of original and originating matricide. Kristeva will show us that this matricide is necessary for the origination of the modern subject.

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19 *Ibid*., p. 16.
20 *Ibid*., p. 17.
21 *Ibid*., p. 19.
22 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, p. 27.
23 Jonte-Pace, 'Situating Kristeva Differently,' p. 21.
24 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, p. 20.
25 Jonte-Pace, 'Situating Kristeva Differently,' p. 21.

At the beginning of the process by which we emerge as modern selves lies a trauma of absence and death. I will use sketches of what I wish to call Cavell's theological history of skepticism at the end of *The Claim of Reason* to argue that the desire of authenticated existence is part of the formation of the skeptical impulse. Whereas Cavell points to the religious and epistemological formation that gave rise to the skeptical problem, Kristeva uncovers its matricidal underside. In the next and final section of this chapter, I will argue that implied in this kind of (disappointing and violent) promise for existence we find an alternative religious imagination, namely an imagination of human becoming. At this point, however, let us ask why 'we' are spinning this complex web or why we are spun into it? How can we differently weave the connections between absence, the succoring love of the mother and the beyond?

The abject at the heart of subjectivity and language

Addressing these questions I wish to continue this chapter by providing further background to Julia Kristeva's work. Listening to this particular woman's voice will help us to understand the connections between gender, subjectivity and 'the beyond.' Like Cavell, Kristeva is deeply worried by the misunderstanding that language and subjectivity are simply there. She probes the possibility of language and discovers (like Cavell) that the 'symbolic' (the world of counting and accounting, as we could say in Cavellian language) is made possible by something prior and beyond symbolism. Kristeva calls this the 'semiotic.' In contrast to the symbolic, the semiotic relates to pure imagination and fluid boundaries and ever-changing connections. Out of this semiotic (and in continuous relationship with it) arises the symbolic and thus the subject in language.

Reference to the semiotic serves multiple purposes for Kristeva. On the one hand it allows her to reflect on the question of creativity in language – an issue that we have already encountered in Cavell's reflections on the question of how we can 'go on' in language. More importantly, the semiotic sets the stage for a discussion of the bodily nature of language and the gendered nature of subject formation and language acquisition. The semiotic modality of language is both connected to the body of the mother (out of which all subjectivity grows) and related to 'the feminine' as the unspeakable counterpart of the world of the Father (that is, the masculine order of the symbolic). Cavell speaks about these issues more or less overtly from a Freudian perspective, while Kristeva critically engages with the Freudian legacy on gender, self, and language. Thus, it is not surprising to find that both authors operate within similar frameworks of gender. At the same time, a look at how Kristeva negotiates explicitly the inherited Freudian conundrum of language and gender will help us understand what is at stake in the skeptic's fear of the woman.

From her doctoral thesis *Revolution in Poetic Language* onward, Kristeva focused on the 'semiotic' as the aspect of language that exceeds linear structures of meaning.[26] Paying particular attention to the material reality of language, its rhythmic patterns, sounds, cadences, and tones, Kristeva brings to light the 'other side' of language

26 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 24.

which produces meaning without denotative content. This other side opens each text to multiple and, at times contradictory, meanings. The semiotic thus disables the fiction that a sign conveys a single stable or absolute meaning. Ultimately, the semiotic helps Kristeva relocate language into the body. She argues that 'the dynamics that operate the symbolic are already working within the material of the body and the presymbolic imagery,' which is structured and governed by the emergence of drives and desires.[27] Kristeva calls this physical modality of language 'the semiotic,' arguing that it cooperates with 'the symbolic' modality of language in the process of meaning making. She writes, 'These two modalities are inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language.'[28] The balance of these modalities in a given text may vary but both modalities are always present and interacting in each instance of language use – intermingling with and transforming each other. Despite their cooperation, the semiotic is both logically and biographically prior to the symbolic. Without a bodily basis there is neither a system of counting and accounting, nor a web of signification. I have to breathe, say, shout, or whisper my words. Only through vocalization do words come into the world. Saying, breathing, or stating inflects words with meaning and makes them 'my words' and words that are said here and now.

My ability to have words (and the fact that words can be) is, however, grounded in the body in yet another and more fundamental way. Kristeva traces the question of what makes words possible (or of what makes having words possible) deeper into the bodily origin of subject formation. My development that leads into the symbolic, into the world of counting and accounting, and therefore my rise to subjectivity, originates in the body. But this originating body is not mine. I develop into a self out of my mother's body. The semiotic, which is both the basis of the symbolic and that which exceeds its control, develops out of the flow of drives and energies prior to the emergence of self or other and thus prior to the intervention of the Father. As we have already seen, Kristeva uses Plato's concept of the *chora* to describe this originating nature of the semiotic.[29] In Plato's picture, it is through the intervention of a male deity impregnating this formless *chora* with his form-giving sperm that order can arise. Without his seed no knowledge and no reality would be possible. Kristeva links this Platonic fathering deity with Lacan's wordplay on the Name and the forbidding 'No' of the father. In Lacan's picture, the mother-child symbiosis is interrupted through the forbidding 'no!' of the father. This moment of origins is at the same time the child's entrance into society and into a formed world of concepts and names. The 'no' enables language for the child and the child's becoming as a subject in language. In Lacan's picture the ability to have language is a male principle and consequently it is impossible for women to be speaking subjects on their own terms. The experience of being a woman can only be expressed in male terms. Or, to invoke Cavell, women are always in the mute position of Cordelia. There are no words for them.

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27 Kelly Oliver, *Subjectivity without Subjects. From Abject Fathers to Desiring Mothers* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), p. 55.

28 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 24.

29 Plato, *Timaeus*, 49a–52d.

Kristeva seemingly accepts these gender stereotypes and their consequences for the issue of the silencing of women. Nevertheless, she probes more deeply into the maternal ground of our possession of language and development as selves. Without women, without the maternal body, there would be no language, no breathing, speaking, declaring. Without the connection to the maternal *chora* there is no meaning. Kristeva characterizes the *chora* as 'an ancient, mobile, unstable receptacle, prior to the One, to the father, even to the syllable, metaphorically suggesting something nourishing and maternal.'[30] We can read this as an observation that the *chora* is the space out of which imagination and creativity rise into language. Without connection to this maternal principle, without the semiotic dimension of language, words would be empty, devoid of meaning.

This insight can shed important new light onto Cavell's discussion of Wittgenstein's vision of language. The fact that we have to draw connections (and that those connections are not simply drawn for us) revealed that identifications ('this is what I call "a cat"') are based not on clear rules of synthesis. Rather, what kind of connections we draw and consider as natural or inviting for us depends on acts of imagination. It is as though we are forever noting, I draw these connections, which ones do you draw? Meaning is not secured through a given structure of grammar but grammar is created through our use of words and the work of imagining new uses. To put this in Cavellian terms, we need the time of the night in order to create language. The 'time of the night,' or of 'twilight,' and the time of dreams invite us to peer into a world of fluid connections and of metamorphoses. As any psychoanalyst can recount, in our dreams we are opened to multiple possible identifications and visions of self (some sobering, some bizarre). What we consciously create and cultivate as self rests on the fluidity of the dreamscape of our imagination. Cavell's vision of language allows us to see the 'semiotic' basis of all language formation.

According to Kristeva, the *chora* or the fluidity of the 'semiotic' possesses an

> ... eternal function: to introduce through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it. The theory of the unconscious seeks the very thing that poetic language practices within and against the social order: the ultimate means of its transformation or subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution.[31]

The survival of language is predicated on the revolution of language through the semiotic's working within the symbolic. *Kristeva's notion of the 'semiotic' can help us identify the skeptic's fear of the woman as a fear of this 'maternal' or 'feminine' basis of language which both sustains and destabilizes the order of words and things. At the heart of philosophy's fear of the beyond lies a fear of the powers of the maternal or of the feminine semiotic. But what motivates this fear? What is so horrible about the feminine and the mother? To answer these questions we need to understand better how Kristeva thinks about the relationship to the mother in the process of subject formation and language-acquisition.*

30 Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, p. 5.

31 Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 81.

The abject (m)other

Central to Kristeva's thinking about the mother is the notion of 'the abject,' a formulation she develops to critique idyllic, socially reinforced ideals of motherhood. Kristeva thinks that these ideals are produced by a '*fantasy* nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory.' Freud evokes this fantasy in describing the relationship between mother and son as 'altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships.'[32] This fantasy, which enables the Oedipal process, covers a deeper story of desire and death. In this story we find a mix of ambivalent desires for and fears of the mother. Kristeva's 'abject' probes into this ambivalence toward the mother. In so doing, her analysis disengages the forces that structure language and culture from the fantasy of the Oedipal master-plot. Instead, she traces these drives back into the dynamic of the ambivalent relationship to our maternal origin.

In Kristeva's narrative of subject formation, the abject arises out of the separation from the maternal body that produces both the 'I' as subject of desire and the mother as the primal object of desire. Kristeva writes about the maternal body in *Powers of Horror* 'having been the mother, [this body] will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting.'[33] Kristeva points here to the ambiguous boundaries between the motherly body and the body of the child prior to the Oedipal conflict and even prior to what Lacan calls the mirror stage. The Oedipal master-narrative presupposes a unified subject (the child) desiring a unified object (the mother). The question is now how this unification of desire happens? Lacan's mirror stage posits that the child sees herself (as in a mirror) as unified even as the bodily experience of disjointed drives remains diffuse. This experience sets up a split in the developing consciousness of the child between the self as an idealized and never realizable *vision* and the child's disjointed *bodily and experiential* reality. Kristeva theorizes that prior to this unification of desires there has to be a proto-separation within the mother-child symbiosis:

> The abject confronts us ... within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of the *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language [before the Oedipal master-story]. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling.[34]

In the early time before the mirror stage the child neither experiences itself as 'self' nor the mother as 'other.' The differentiation between 'my' body and the 'mother's body' (my toe and her breast) is not yet recognized. Rather, child-mother forms an experiential (dis)unity. It is not a clear-cut unity because such a concept would presuppose some form of experience that toe and mouth and breast are related to

32 Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume 22 (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 33.

33 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 13.

34 *Ibid*., p. 13.

one being and not to another. This, however, would imply a sense of otherness that is not yet given. In this state what counts as belonging or as not belonging is not identifiable.

This lack of clear boundaries poses a significant problem for the process of separation. In this process, the child cannot tell whether what it separates itself from (and is separated from) is in fact its own or the mother's body (its other). Thus, separation from the maternal body implies that the child separates 'it-self' – rejects part of its 'proto-self,' as we might say. Out of this act of abjection appears the space that the mother, as the first other, will inhabit. At the same time, the space that I will inhabit is a space where another has already dwelled: 'I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be "me." Not at all an other with whom I can identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes me and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be.'[35]

Narcissistic crisis 'Abjection is therefore a kind of *narcissistic* crisis: it is witness to the ephemeral aspect of the state called "narcissism",' writes Kristeva.[36] According to her, primary narcissism develops the structure that later results in the idealizing identification with the mirror image. Primary narcissism thus lays the groundwork for further narcissistic identifications. The pattern of this earliest founding narcissism is, according to Kristeva, the pattern of *mimesis*. It is not, however, a mere pattern of identification, as this would presuppose that an already constructed ego imitates a unified object. Rather, the pattern forming mimesis is a pre-objectival identification through incorporation. The primary pre-objectival identification of the child happens with the mother's breast: 'The infant becomes the breast through its incorporation.'[37] Abjection as the precondition of narcissism creates this empty space. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes about the connection between abjection and mimesis:

> *Mimesis* by means of which he [the human being] becomes homologous to another in order to become himself, is in short logically and chronologically secondary. Even before being *like*, 'I' am not but do *separate, reject, ab-ject*. Abjection, with a meaning broadened to take in subjective diachrony, *is a precondition of narcissism.* It is coexistent with it and causes it to be permanently brittle. The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed.[38]

Abjection is thus the crisis brought about by the act and necessity of identification. On the one hand, abjection is the expulsion of what needs to stay beyond 'my' boundaries for the 'I' to come into being. Some part of 'mother-me' (or 'me-mother') has to be jettisoned in order for 'me' to become and for 'other' to arise as mother. At the same time, abjection is the experience of partial participation in that which is jettisoned. Kristeva writes that abjection is

35 *Ibid*., p. 10.

36 *Ibid*., p. 14.

37 Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 72.

38 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.13.

> ... an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility for doing so.[39]

The abject is not an object, a stable identifiable entity to be desired (or not to be desired). The abject is not excluded firmly enough to become an object and the self is not established firmly enough to face it as wholly other. Even so, the abject is not nothing. Rather the abject is a no-thing. The abject denotes a relationship of bordering. Kristeva explicitly relates her notion of abjection to Mary Douglas' work on defilement in *Purity and Danger*. Like filth, abjection is 'not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly' the abject represent the other side of that boundary, that is, 'a margin.'[40] The inability to pinpoint the abject on either side of the boundary is not unlike the difficulty of determining if and when a threshold is inside or outside. The abject thus reveals an instability that is inherently part of the act of bordering. Demarcating 'my' identification as the pre-subject and 'mother' as the pre-object implies boundaries that are inherently unstable.The border itself reveals (or covers) something ambiguous and in between that defies systematic parceling. The abject is covered by the border. The border establishes the fiction of clearly separated spaces, by covering over its own character as a mixed space. 'We may call it a border,' writes Kristeva, 'abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject form what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection is itself a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives.'[41]

Again: abjection and signs Recall that Kristeva's explorations of the depth of subject formation were directed at identifying the structures structuring language or the symbolic. By pointing to the pattern of narcissism and abjection as the precondition of discourse, *Kristeva's work reveals a picture of symbolization as predicated on a precarious relationship of bordering*.

The Symbolic can only maintain itself through a care for borders; yet the abject reveals that these borders are always fragile and never completely drawn. Kelly Oliver comments:

> The abject threat comes from what has been prohibited by the Symbolic order, what has been prohibited so that the Symbolic order can be. The prohibition that founds, and yet undermines, society is the prohibition against the maternal body, whether it is the oedipal prohibition against incest formulated by Freud, the prohibition against the mother's desire or *jouissance* formulated by Lacan, or the prohibitions against the semiotic *chora* formulated by Kristeva. All of these prohibitions are directed against the maternal body. It is what is off limits.[42]

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39 Julia Kristeva, 'Interview with Julia Kristeva': also in Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 55.

40 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 69.

41 *Ibid*., pp. 10–11.

42 Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 56.

The repression of incestuous desire allows the child to enter as subject the realm of language and the symbolic; this repression is secondary and built 'on an enigmatic foundation that has already been marked off.'[43] Prior to this secondary repression (and enabling both this repression itself and language) lies a 'primal' repression 'separating the subject from what will be subject and its objects.'[44] Although this primary repression lies before the repression enabling language, the abject can only appear within language: 'The abject is that pseudo-object that is made up before but appears only *within* the gaps of secondary repression.'[45] Within the gaps of language, in the lacunae of the symbolic, the semiotic reveals itself as abject. After the mirror-stage 'from that moment on, while I recognize my image as sign and change in order to signify' the symbolic represses the semiotic and with it the maternal chora.[46] The pulsations of the abject (the ambivalent carving out of proto-I and proto-object) are only preserved in the dynamics of desire. In the act of desiring the (unified) subject is driven towards a desired object (equally unified and other). And from the perspective of this act narcissism seems like a return to 'a position set back from the other, a return to a self-contemplative, conservative, self-sufficient haven.'[47] If, however, my desire for the other is frustrated, this narcissistic haven reveals itself as the chaotic muddle of drives that it truly is. In these moments of crisis, the abject shows itself as

> ... the violence of mourning for an 'object' that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments. It takes the ego back to its sources on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away – it [the abject] assigns it [the ego] a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance.[48]

This interpretation of the narcissistic crisis sheds light on Cavell's reading of what he calls the 'Melodrama of the Unknown Women.' Their desire for a man who acknowledges a woman's humanity and her desire (and hence his own desirous nature) is unfulfilled – a frustration that forces the women back into the situation of primary narcissism. In a curious aside, Kristeva claims that these moments of narcissistic frustrations are 'all things considered, the permanent state of the speaking being, if he only would hear himself speak.' At any time the speaking being draws from the 'resources of primary repression.' All functioning of language in principle provides a 'view of the abject' operating underneath and within the symbolic (*ibid.*). The symbolic function of language is permanently open to the revelation of its instability. 'The prohibition against the maternal body' is never successful.[49] What is rejected in the symbolic denial of the maternal body is the profound experience of 'otherness' at the heart of our individual becoming. Maternity 'is an identity that

43 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
44 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
45 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
46 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
47 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
48 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
49 *Ibid.*, pp. 14–5.

splits, turns in on itself and changes without becoming other.'[50] As Kelly Oliver has pointed out, the maternal body, where sameness and otherness are folded into each other, questions the very notion of identity and difference.[51]

In sum, the maternal (as fundament which provokes a crisis for identity as well as difference) keeps signification in process and allows us to 'go on' in language. Here the very boundaries of self are simultaneously drawn and undermined. The heterogeneity of language and self – the contradictory dynamics of the symbolic and the semiotic – and the attempts to bind these modalities reveals not a stabilizing law. Rather these dynamics point toward a space (the border) and an act (the bordering) of ambiguous designations of self and other. This identity-giving and undermining ambiguity is represented in the maternal body and preserved in the abject: 'Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be – maintaining that night in which the outlines of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out.'[52] Thus 'abjection' is the ex-post designation of a prior unnamable violent expulsion.

Symbolic violence

This reading of the abject and of the maternal body reveals a disturbing violence at the originating site of language and the self: 'Matricide is our vital necessity.'[53] In order to become separate from the mother and to begin the entrance into language as subject, the child has to abject part of his or her originating mother-self-body. This separating violence cannot be regarded as a denial. This would presuppose an object to be denied. Rather, abjection is an act of excision – an excision that at the same time preserves the abject. Kristeva writes:

> The 'unconscious' contents remain there *excluded* but in a strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive position to be established – one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration. As if the fundamental opposition were between I and Other or, in more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside.[54]

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50 Kristeva, Julia, 'A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident,' in: Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, pp. 292–300, p. 297.

51 Oliver, *Reading Kristeva,* p. 183. Kristeva had identified in poetic language a similar weaving together of sameness and difference. Poetic language is language functioning in the symbolic mode while at the same time bringing language to its own end emphasizing the semiotic non-signifying elements. Poetry's rhythm and tones affect the reader. The words of a poem derive meaning not just from the signifying function of the symbolic but perhaps even more so from the sounds that touch the reader's affects. Oliver remarks that for Kristeva, poetic language 'shows how signification comes to be out of non-signifying semiotic bodily drives. By pointing to signification in process, poetry also points to a subject-in-process. For, as Kristeva says, any theory of language is also a theory of the subject' (*ibid*., p. 182).

52 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 10.

53 Kristeva, *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, p. 27.

54 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 7.

The defensive position imagines the opposition between the inside and outside of the mother's body to be fundamental. It is after all the inside of this maternal body out of which the child develops. The child must separate from the body of the mother in order to become autonomous or to become herself/himself. The symbiotic child identifies and discovers itself first with the mother's breast and needs to wean itself or be weaned from the breast and mother. It has to abject both. The original identification is then transferred to the mother's sex and, more specifically, the birth canal. The mother's sex, 'this murky space between the inside and outside,' becomes the new locus of the child's identification.[55]

The child sees itself as the product of this birthing and swallowing opening, this opening between the inner and the outer. In the image of the maternal sex, the child sees itself as expelled – abjected – from the mother's body and gains identity as pre-object through this abjection: 'The child becomes abject in order to avoid both separation from, and identification with, the maternal body – both equally painful, both equally impossible.'[56] This impossible position of simultaneous identification with and separation from the maternal body engenders hatred and fear. This is a hatred of the fact that the subject-to-be cannot free itself from the mother's body and the like fear that this subject-to-be might be devoured by the body that turns the inside out: 'If there is a sort of rage against mothers it is not only because they take care of the child, it is because they carry it in their bodies.'[57] In this rage, the mother is experienced as abject, allowing the child to become autonomous. Yet this situation is unstable as well. If the mother remains abject then she cannot become an object, let alone the object of love for the male child along the lines of the heterosexual Oedipus master-plot. The child thus oscillates between, on the one hand, an abject self united with a sublime mother and, on the other, an abject mother and a phobic self. The mother is split in two – the mother as abject and the mother as sublime. Commenting on the representation of the mother in Céline's poetry, Kristeva writes, 'The theme of the two-faced mother is perhaps the representation of the baleful *power of women* to bestow mortal life.'[58] Part of the genesis of the subject and of language is therefore a seemingly unavoidable rage and hatred against the body of the mother. Language is thus deeply implicated in violence against (some) women – against mothers and their bodies. The task for the child is to both lose the mother and to find her again in symbols – in language – thereby negating the original loss. Through the appeal to allegory, the child can negotiate the loss of the mother's breast, even as the fact of this loss is denied: 'I found her again' in imagination and in words. 'The child king becomes irredeemably sad before uttering his first words,' Kristeva writes in *Black Sun*, 'this is because he has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother, *a loss that causes him to try to find her again, along with other objects of love, first in the imagination, then in words*.'[59]

55 Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 60.

56 *Ibid*., p. 60.

57 Kristeva, 'Interview with Julia Kristeva,' p. 138.

58 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 158, italics added.

59 Kristeva, *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, p. 6, italics added.

According to Cavell's analysis, the skeptical worry is rooted in separation anxiety. Given what we have learned from Kristeva, it seems that this anxiety is indeed a human problem. Both men and women are affected by the anxious realization that the very borders that brought them into being also permanently threaten language and stable self. While Kristeva can help further Cavell's diagnosis of the skeptical problem, her work complicates Cavell's therapeutic suggestions. Given Kristeva's insistence on the necessity of matricide, the violent repression of the 'feminine voice' or 'the semiotic' *seems unavoidable*. Consequently, the skeptical problem (repression of the 'feminine voice') cannot be truly solved. What Cavell calls the 'feminine' is in Kristeva's analysis the maternal body. The abjection of the maternal within our 'personal archeology' enables language and self. This violence is inescapable since the borders of the subject and the borders of the symbolic remain permanently unstable. The repression of the maternal body is never complete, meaning that this repressed body 'cannot really be held down.'[60] If we accept this diagnosis, listening to the 'feminine' voice alone will not do. The cure, it seems, cannot consist simply in breaking down the very boundaries that enable the formation of the symbolic and of the self. We are thus left with two questions: first, what must be released in order to relieve the skeptical fear? Second, how can this release happen without victimizing female bodies? Can an alternative imagination of the process of human becoming avoid such victimization?

A Theological History of Skepticism

At the end of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell presents the problem of the other as 'the modern problem of human history.' The extent and character of this problem becomes clear only through the act of recounting how skepticism is lived: 'The idea is that the problem of the other is discovered through telling its history' (*CR*, p. 468). Cavell's historical sketch can help us to further our dialogue with Kristeva in accounting for the religious issues implied in living the skeptical life. Following his history of the skeptical life will allow us to draw the contours of the new religious imagination needed to overcome the skeptic's violence.

Cavell describes the first task as accounting for the 'particular insanity required, or caused, or threatened, in the very conceiving of the problem' (*CR*, p. 469). What came to the fore in Kristeva's archeology of subjectivity and language was the task of knowing how to lose the body of the mother. Before this loss, the original event out of which the child's identity develops is the bodily formation of the mother-child with its proto-separations and unities. In distinction to the mother as object in language and desire, Kristeva call this originating body the 'Thing.' The child has to go through the passage of losing, mourning, and finding the body of the mother in language. The force that drives symbolization is therefore the structure of insufficient replacement. I regain the mother as an object of desire and therefore in the process of naming; yet this recovery is never complete. The body of the mother remains lost and this loss remains present. Thus, the Thing is conveyed (translated)

60 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 13.

through morning; yet it remains to *be conveyed* even beyond the process of complete mourning. There is always more to mourn.

Without this ability to lose the mother, the child can never fully enter into the world of language; and even if he manages to enter into some form of linguistic community his words will remain empty. Any person who remains arrested in the depressive state of losing the mother will remain disconnected from the ability to make sense. To illustrate this thought, Kristeva points again to the texture of depressive speech. The words of the depressed are experienced as dead and alien. They lack a connection to 'semiotic imprints (drive-relate representatives and affect representations).'[61] To use a Cavellian phrasing, the depressed person cannot *own* her words. She cannot give them *her* inflections; her words do not express *her desire* or her vision and feeling of self. Kristeva writes:

> [I]n the best of cases, speaking beings and their language are like one: is not speech our 'second nature'? In contrast, the speech of the depressed is to them like an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their own skin. They have lost the meaning – the value of their mother tongue for want of losing the mother. The dead language they speak ... conceals a Thing buried alive. The latter, however, will not be translated in order that it not be betrayed; it shall remain walled up within the *crypt* of the inexpressible affect, anally harnessed, with no way out.[62]

The task is to lose – productively – the Thing with the help of translation. Transforming it into an imagined 'primal object' as the 'ultimate cause of conveyability' helps protect against the pain of losing the Thing and allows for a productive negation of this loss. This primal mother-object exists however only in discourse and thus for a constituted subject. What *can* be said, what is conveyable, is imagined in contrast to what *is in fact* said or conveyed. Thus, 'the conveyable can be imagined and posited as in excess and incommensurable.'[63]

Theology and the fantasy of conveyability

As in Cavell, our language and our ability to go on in it presupposes and points to something beyond us. Kristeva senses the theological or metaphysical undercurrents of this setting, however. Both invoke religious language and both resist naming this beyond in clearly theological terms. Kristeva cautions, 'positing the existence of that other language and even of an other of language, indeed of an outside-of-language, is not necessarily setting up a preserve for metaphysics or theology.'[64] While this connection with theology or metaphysics is not necessary, it is possible and very much present in her texts. In fact, Kristeva's own ambiguity toward Christianity shows how difficult it is to avoid these theological or metaphysical references: 'The postulate [of a primal object which always remains to be conveyed] corresponds to a psychic requirement that Western metaphysics and theory have had, perhaps,

61 Kristeva, *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, p. 52.
62 *Ibid*., p. 53.
63 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
64 *Ibid*., p. 66.

the good luck and audacity to represent. That psychic requirement is certainly not universal.'[65] I interpret this passage as an insightful description of the cultural roots of her own analytic project. Kristeva's analysis of language acquisition and subject formation does not proceed within a cultural vacuum. Her analysis is important not so much in the field of clinical evaluations of individual cases of depression nor is it particularly significant in the field of gaining knowledge as to how 'we' acquire language and are formed into social subjects. Instead (and more meaningfully), Kristeva's analysis monumentalizes the fantasy of modern Western subjectivity and language. *She provides, to my mind, an astute look into the story told by Western theoreticians obsessed with the (hopeful or frustrated) desire to convey the 'Thing.'* This story is a story of attempted mastery and a story full of pain:

> The wager of conveyability is also a wager that the primal object can be mastered; in that sense it is an attempt to fight depression (due to an intrusive pre-object that I cannot give up) by means of a torrent of signs, which aims precisely at capturing the object of joy, fear, or pain. Metaphysics, and its obsession with conveyability, is a discourse of the pain that is stated and relieved on account of that very statement.[66]

Evocations of religion and of God-given presence are folded into expressions of and imagined therapies for the pain of losing the maternal body. I take it that consequently, it is not easy to disregard these imaginary therapies. To do so would also imply a fundamental disregard for the pain at the origin of our modern existence. It is possible, I hear Kristeva say, not to pay attention to the pain or not to acknowledge the primal Thing, and its role as the primal 'referent.' It is possible to experience language without connection to this foundation or 'without innerness and without truth' as she puts it.[67] She goes on to say that such an option would leave us, in the words of a Chinese friend of hers, 'without means for facing the onset of pain;' and Kristeva asks, 'Is that an advantage of weakness?'[68] These comments express to my mind Kristeva's understanding of the pain that motivates the endeavor of the metaphysically obsessed theoretician. It is deeply inadequate to simply say something like, 'There is no final referent to our signs. There is no foundation of self and language. All that is left is the celebration of the free play of signifiers.' Earlier I had mentioned that it is insufficient to say that the skeptic is searching for shelter in 'castles made out of air.' Cavell reminds us not to gloss over the pain or over the anxiety exhibited by the skeptic if we wish to understand him or her. Neither can we gloss over the pain exhibited by Kristeva's melancholic metaphysician. Whether or not this pain is a weakness seems to be beside the point.

Metaphysical projects of naming the unnamable are, in Kristeva's analysis, therefore negotiations of suffering. More precisely, they are attempts to alleviate the profound 'sadness at being separated from the loved object through an unbelievable effort to master signs in order to have them correspond to primal, unnamable,

65 *Ibid*., p. 66.
66 *Ibid*., p. 67.
67 *Ibid*., p. 67.
68 *Ibid*., p. 67.

traumatic experiences.' Yet these metaphysical efforts of conveying the mother and of mastering the loss lead to a dead end:

> The belief in conveyability ('mother is nameable,' 'God is nameable') leads to a strongly individualized discourse, avoiding stereotypes and clichés, as well as to the profusion of individual styles. But in that very practice we end up with the perfect *betrayal* of the unique and in-self Thing (the *Res divina*): if all the fashions of naming it are allowable, does not the Thing postulated in itself become dissolved in the thousand and one ways of naming it? The posited conveyability ends up with a multiplicity of possible conveyances. The Western subject, as potential melancholic being, having become a relentless conveyor, ends up a confirmed gambler or potential atheist.[69]

Kristeva's clear connection between the nameability of God and of mother, reappears in her interpretation of Nerval's poem 'El Desdichado' (The Disinherited). She describes Nerval's tireless wanderings and his withdrawal 'into the crypt of a past that haunted him.'[70] The uprooted oak said to be painted on the shield of the disinherited knight in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* is an apt image for Nerval himself. The object of loss, however, is not quite an object. Rather, as Kristeva writes, what is lost is an 'unnamable domain' or something that is not quite an object yet, namely 'the secret and unreachable horizon of our loves and desires.' As such, 'it assumes, *for the imagination*, the consistency of an archaic mother, which, however, no precise image manages to encompass.' Kristeva immediately continues, somewhat surprisingly, with an observation about 'the accumulation of feminine divinities or mother goddesses' in Eastern, particularly Egyptian, religion. This proliferation of divine names stresses to her mind even more the 'elusive nature of that *Thing* – necessarily lost so that this "subject," separated from the "object," might become a speaking being.'[71] Note the fact that the lost Thing, which founds our languages and desires, and which is unreachable like the horizon is *imagined as an archaic mother* but is named within the *context of religion*.

As we have seen, the obsession with this unnamable and constantly conveyed 'Thing' is a 'Western Fate' according to Kristeva. Moreover, she claims that this 'melancholia subtends the "crisis of values" that shook up the nineteenth century.'[72] Kristeva links this crisis with the earlier political and religious upheavals of the French Revolution, events that she describes as creating a 'true melancholy experience of man's symbolic resources.' Kristeva observes with reference to Walter Benjamin that modern imagination 'has been deprived of both classical and religious stability but is still anxious to give itself a new meaning (as long as we speak, as long as artists create).'[73] I take it that what makes Nerval's poetic subjectivity in crisis poignant for 'us' – who have inherited or pay for the Western fate – is the melancholic and hence atheistic foundation of this crisis. Nerval creates his 'I' in a situation of religious instability where the lone star is dead and the origin of self and language remains

69 *Ibid*., p. 68.
70 *Ibid*., p. 143.
71 *Ibid*., p. 145.
72 *Ibid*., p. 171.
73 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

beyond naming. In an Emersonian vein, the disinherited poet writes himself into the position facing the death (or negation) of the divine. *Under these conditions* 'there looms the possibility of replacement through a series of imaginary filiations,' writes Kristeva:

> Such mythical, esoteric, or historical families or brotherhoods or doubles that Nerval feverishly imposes in place of the One, however, seem finally to be endowed with incantatory, conspiratorial, ritual value. Instead of pointing to their concrete referent, those names indicate, rather than mean, a massive, uncircumventable, unnamable presence, as if they were the anaphora of the unique object; not the mother's 'symbolic equivalent,' [that is, not representing her as object of desire] but the shifter 'this,' empty of meaning. Names are the gestures that point to the lost being out of which the 'black sun of melancholia' first breaks up, before the erotic *object* separated from the mournful subject settles in, along with the linguistic *artifice of signs* that transports that object to the symbolic level.[74]

Nerval's poem is a ritual oblation, an anaphora, to this lost original presence before the advent of self and of other. Kristeva describes the poetic signs as ciphers 'without signifieds, as *infra* or *supra*-signs, which beyond communication, attempt to reach the dead or untouchable object, to take over the untouchable being.' The strategy of heaping divine names upon names (the sophistication of polytheist knowledge) aims at leading us to the 'edge of the unsymbolized.'[75] Through the divine names Nerval invokes his mother. Thus, underneath the strategies of religious naming (both its alleged successes and the Nervallian failures) we find the imagined archaic mother. Yet, as Kristeva comments 'by representing that unsymbolized as a maternal object, a source of sorrow and nostalgia, but of ritual veneration as well, the melancholy imagination sublimates it and gives itself a protection against collapsing into asymbolism.'[76] This provokes the question of what would it be to represent the unnamable and originating Thing outside of the mythology of motherhood? What alternate religious imagination would be available that neither burdens symbolically the body of women with the violence of abjection nor forces the subjection into the dissolution of asymbolia? To answer these questions we need to better understand the theology of absence that motivates and pains Nerval. Kristeva claims that Nerval is 'afflicted with the same nihilism that shook Europe from Jean Paul's well-known utterance all the way to [Nerval's] epigraph of *Christ on the Mount of Olives*: "God is dead! The sky is empty ... / Weep! Children, you no longer have a father! ... No, God does not exist".'[77] It is the loss of God the Father that Nerval mourns, and concomitant with this is the experience of a Europe shaken by the departure of this divine guarantee of human existence. Does the loss of God the Father result inevitably in tasking the archaic mother with filling his absence? What precisely is the void left behind by the death of this God? A turn to what I want to call Cavell's theological history of skepticism can help to address these questions.

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74 *Ibid*., pp. 164f.

75 *Ibid*., p. 165.

76 *Ibid*., p. 165.

77 *Ibid*., p. 163. Kristeva quotes here Gerard de, Nerval 'Le Christ des Oliviers,' *Oeuvres Complètes*. *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), vol. 1, p. 36.

God and the authentication of human existence

'As long as God exists, I am not alone,' (*CR*, p. 470) writes Cavell. One way to imagine the life of the skeptic is to invoke the fantasy of theological presence, which secures that I can be known and authenticated by my other. Theological absence, on the other hand, provokes the problem of the other who 'now bears the weight of God ... This requires understanding the philosophical problem of the other as the trace or scar of the departure of God' (*ibid.*). It is important to realize however that *this* idea of God as an authenticating presence is specified through the Cartesian fantasy of the private self. Part and parcel of the skeptical life, as we have seen over and over again, is the idea that 'to know and to be known by another is to penetrate or to be penetrated by another' (*ibid.*). On this account, knowing another implies the violation of his most deeply held privacies. To be known means to let the other penetrate the depths of my body. Consequently, the idea of 'knowledge as the violation of privacy' has a sexual expression in 'the wish for *absolute* activeness and *absolute* passiveness; which is to say, for absolute recognition of and by another' (*ibid.*, italics added). The problem of the other is thus not only a *trace* of the departure of God – it is rather a scar left by the dual constructions of privacy and penetrative knowledge. The two are interdependent, such that the very idea of the latter is 'prepared by the idea, or creation, of the self as private' (*ibid.*). The fixation on privacy itself has deep theological roots: 'An initiating form for the achievement of privacy would be the convulsion of sensibility we call the rise of Protestantism. From then on, one manages one's relation to God alone, in particular one *bears the brunt* alone of being known to God' (*ibid.*, italics added). I highlight the expression to 'bear the brunt' to point out that Cavell seems to think that theological knowledge is not exempt from the violent penetrative construction of knowing. Being known to God, like being known to Othello, is a scarifying affair. According to Cavell, a theologico-epistemological complex leads to the problem of the other, to the sadomasochistic configuration of knowledge, and hence to the violent alternative of total theological presence or absence. Cavell's short remark about the 'rise of Protestantism' can make us aware that the skeptical condition has itself complex roots in religious, epistemic, and political practices.[78] For our purpose here, we can retain an important insight from Cavell's theological history of skepticism: the focus on 'privacy' as an important marker of subjectivity originates out of a complex web of religious, literary, and epistemological (together with other social and political) practices. In its own turn, the skeptic's epistemology leads to specific theological expectations and alternatives. These inform and reinforce the skeptical constructions of knowledge.

Both the Cartesian God and Othello's Desdemona reflect this theological and epistemological obsession with existence, privacy, and penetrative knowledge. With this obsession comes the idea that 'the integrity of my (human, finite) existence may depend on the fact and on the idea of another being's existence, and on the possibility of *proving* that existence; an existence conceived from my very dependence and

78 Michel Foucault's connection between the development of modern subjectivity and the practice of auricular confession comes to mind. Michel Foucault, 'About the Beginning,' *Political Theory*, 21 (1993): 198–227.

incompleteness, hence conceived as perfect, and conceived as producing me "in some sense, in [its] own image"' (*CR*, p. 483). If I could only prove this existence, my own reality would be authenticated – this is the skeptical solution. Whether or not this authenticating existence is found on the body of a woman or a divinity seems irrelevant for the structure of the solution. This is, nevertheless, only an imaginary solution, one that reproduces the vision of a human nature whose existence must be verified by reference to a perfect other, by way of knowledge that is conceived as totally active or passive penetration. This kind of theological and epistemological solution reconstitutes the skeptical problem. The God, whose absence Kristeva and Cavell diagnosed and whose death Nerval and others mourned, is already the divine as imagined under the influence of the skeptical project. This point is echoed by Cavell's move to understand both Descartes and Nietzsche as saying that 'the idea of God is part of the (idea of) human nature' (*ibid.*). Overcoming this theological idea presupposes finding a new anthropology. At the same time, finding this new vision of the human also involves a new religious imagination, one that supports the painful processes of human becoming without victimizing the feminine.

More specifically, the theological expectation that God is the guarantor of human existence arises within, and reinforces an epistemological framework that allows for, either absolute activity or absolute passivity. I see this alternative as underlying Cavell's analysis of humanity's responsibility for self-authentication in *The Claim of Reason*: on the one hand, in Cavell's post-Cartesian theology, the other now bears the weight of God. We have to 'accept ourselves as our creator' and hence take 'responsibility for ourselves' (*CR*, p. 465). Yet, accepting this responsibility on the other hand leaves us still 'stuck with the idea of the human being as *creature*.' This impasse leads to a paradoxical situation: as creators of ourselves we have to accept and affirm the present state of things 'as something we desire, or anyway desire more than we desire change' (*ibid.*). Thus, positing humanity as the assurance our own existence seems to inevitably lead to stasis. Nothing new can happen in this world. In other words, either God is totally active in creating human existence or 'we' humans are tasked to have total activity. Our responsibility for complete activity however devolves into stagnating passivity. While Cavell has sketched out this conundrum in *The Claim of Reason*, his turn to literature, film, and opera helped him to flesh out the bodily and sexual consequences to which living this paradoxical skeptical life will lead. The reluctance of the women in the comedies to accept creation through the 'older friend' illustrates this point, as does the painful aversion and singing self-creation of the women in the operas and melodramas. All of these phenomena demonstrate that what happens when 'the process of humanization [becomes] a monstrous undertaking [by] placing infinite demands upon finite resources' (*CR*, p. 470).

Therefore, it seems to me that it is not God's alleged 'departure' that is the problem but the underlying philosophical anthropology informing this discourse of absence. Othello's cravings, not Desdemona's actions, are the problem. Their structure leads to disappointment independent of what Desdemona does or independent of Humean or Kantian arguments for or against the existence of God. Thus, a second alternate imagined solution to the skeptical life arises in the attempt to sedate this craving. For Cavell, such a strategy consists of embracing a picture of 'seamless' access to each

other and to the word – where the boundaries between our bodies are dissolved or discounted. In this picture, the other who is tasked to authenticate me is conceived as an extension of my own self. As we saw already, Othello projects himself into Desdemona's privacy or treats her as a tool – like a lifeless thing. Yet, people in such a fantasy 'would not (any longer) be human. They would not, for example, be frightened upon meeting others – except in the sense, or under circumstances, in which they would be frightened upon encountering bears or storms, circumstances under which bears would be frightened' (*CR*, p. 468). This is an inflection of what Kristeva called the fantasy of total conveyability: we would be known by each other as we know storms (or bears). 'We no longer recognize, or take an interest in, the difference between things and beings (*the* difference!),' writes Cavell (*ibid.*). This strategy enabled Othello's violent attempt to know Desdemona; and we realized that a consequence of this fantasy of the 'vanishing human' was that knowing one's own inner life became impossible: 'My existence is proven, but at the price of not knowing what it is in itself. And the existence of others is proven, but at the price of their being spectators of my existence, not participants in it' (*CR*, p. 477). In this fantasy we find again the oscillation between total activity and total passivity. The self is completely active in controlling its others who are perceived as completely passive; and the thus-authenticated self becomes totally passive and unknowable. Privacy, and with it the image of complete and inviolate borders, mediates this oscillation. Either the other is completely outside of my self and completely available to my manipulations or the other is completely inside and I am completely exposed to her activity.

Let me highlight that 'existence' is at stake in both of these imagined solutions. In the latter fantasy, the human disappears into stone-like existence, that is, into a state of pure given-ness. The structure of theological authentication in the first fantasy was likewise concerned with proving one's existence. With or without God, this 'idea of the human being as creature' implied the problem of being forced to assent present existence more than change (*CR*, p. 465). The theologico-epistemological structure of skepticism expresses both a fear for newness and the uncontrollable next and a resulting metaphysical obsession with given-ness. As a ward against this uncontrollable next, the skeptic imagines grammar or a 'grammatical god' as being tasked with putting things into place and thus with securing them in their existence. The absence or negation of this specific skeptical Father divinity (that was imagined as guarantor for human existence) provokes the melancholic imagination to represent the unsymbolized pre-object or Thing as 'an archaic mother.' Thus, these are the specific religious and epistemological conditions where failed theological strategies of naming make the imagined archaic mother appear as a stand-in for the Thing. The vanishing of the divinity that guarantees our existence (was this God ever present?) conjures the image of the Thing as mother.

Kristeva claims that these conditions arise from the European cultural context that she calls 'nihilism' or 'atheism.' In her analysis, the political and religious upheavals of the French revolution create this lack of theological presence that captivated both Nerval and Nietzsche. Cavell's history of skepticism, however, allows us to qualify this point. A specific form of 'theism' is negated in the European a-theism, which Kristeva describes, namely the craving for the Cartesian, existence-securing God. This God is itself imagined along the lines (and in support) of epistemological

practices characterized by a focus on privacy and penetration. Cavell mentions Luther, Shakespeare, the 'Renaissance project of the humanization of the world,' and the 'time this project is taken up in romanticism' (*CR*, p. 465). I interpret both Cavell's and Kristeva's short forays into European history in the same way Kristeva understood Nerval's history. They are historians 'of the symbolic events that have led' their bodies toward significance or threatened their consciousness with foundering.[79] Their writings are monuments to the multiple currents of European modernity exhibiting ambivalent desires for an existence-granting paternal deity. The theological-epistemic complex that imagined this deity produces a complex cultural history of abjection and the transference of it onto other bodies: Freud's focus on the existence-granting father makes the mother appear as an idealized object of love even as she is made to disappear as a death-bearing other. In the cracks of this Freudian narrative we find the mother who is the 'instructress of death,' as Peter Homans writes.[80] She must be idealized – and rejected. This ambiguous relationship of love and hatred leads to abjection and idealization onto the female body. Here, the idealization becomes a screen against my own unacknowledged matricidal fantasies:

> I make of Her an image of Death so as not to be shattered through the hatred I bear against myself when I identify with Her, for that aversion is in principle meant for her as it is an individuating dam against confusional love. Thus the feminine as image of death is not only a screen for my fear of castration, but also an imaginary safety catch for the matricidal drive that, *without such a representation*, would pulverize me into melancholia if it did not drive me to crime.[81]

The violence against the female body is a misplaced violence of abjection against the 'maternal container' or the Thing. The mother's body is a placeholder for that origin from which we are uprooted in order to come into being as modern autonomous subjects. Thus, the abjecting violence is not violence directed at this or that particular mother; rather, it is a violence that is situated within the ambiguity toward the pre-object of our origins, that is, the Mother-Thing. It is the death out of which we originate that engenders this violence. In sum, our theological history of skepticism can help contextualize the process of misplacing abjection onto the female body and onto bodies of mothers that Oliver so clearly sees in Kristeva's work:

> Separated from the mother, the child never forgets that it was once part of the mother's body. Without a discourse of myth that allows this primary and unique identity within a firmly established autonomy, the child feels its connection to the maternal body as a threat ... This is especially true for men. Not only is a man's personal identity challenged by his past identity with the mother, but also his sexual identity is challenged. How can he be a man if he was once part of a woman? On the other hand, Kristeva argues that it is easier for men to abject their mothers because their sexual identity is not threatened by this denigration and separation. Women, however, abject themselves when they abject their mothers.[82]

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79 Cf. Kristeva, *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, p. 165.

80 Peter Homans, *The Ability to Mourn. Disillusionment and the Social Origins of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1989), p. 98.

81 Cf. Kristeva, *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, p. 28, italics added.

82 Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 162.

Oliver concludes:

> I find useful Kristeva's suggestion that women's oppression is caused, in part, by the representation of women as mothers ... *Not maternity or reproduction ... are responsible for women's oppression but the representation of them*. She suggests that we need to be able to consider the *maternal function* apart from women and individual mothers. If we can abject the maternal body as part of the maternal function and work through that abjection without abjecting the mother as a woman, then not only does the representation of woman change but also the representation of motherhood.[83]

I agree with Oliver that misplaced abjection – the equation between the abjected Thing and the body of women – lies at the heart of Kristeva's analysis of oppression of women. And I agree with her interpretation that a distinction between 'the maternal function' and the bodies of individual mothers and women underlies Kristeva's road map to ending oppression of women. Finally, Oliver is right in thinking that a new representation of the maternal function will help this process. Nevertheless, I would argue that the melancholic atheism Kristeva identifies in Nerval's poetry strengthens the representational identification of the Thing with the mother's body. This kind of atheism cannot undo the theological-epistemic complex that produces the fantasy of a modern self obsessed with privacy, fearful of its own existence, and caught in the oscillation of activity or passivity. Far from undoing it, modern atheism is itself in the grip of this specific kind of religious expectation. Whether or not the existence-granting father God has left is inconsequential. What victimizes Desdemona and her sisters is the theological-epistemic complex that produced this specific theological desire.

Underneath (and linked to) this fantasy of the existence-granting God we find another religious image propelling newness in language and thus the world. This is the ambivalent figure of the mother. The focus on existence cloaks the pain and fear of becoming. The trace left by, in Cavell's words, 'God's departure,' turns out to be the scar left by becoming through abjection. The absence of a religious discourse that can contain and enable the violent abjection of the Thing while reconnecting us to our unspeakable origins leads to the dialectic of victimization and sanctification of the female body. We saw this dialectic represented in Cavell's figure of the diva as victim of the male world and as teacher speaking from beyond this world. *In other words, a specific theological and epistemological complex produces a skeptical vision of the human and its resulting violence against women. At the same time a paucity of religious imagination of human becoming homologizes the woman with absence and the originating Thing. A new religious imagination of the human or a new human imagination of the religious is needed to allow for a vision of human becoming without victimization of women.*

83 *Ibid*., p. 162, italics added.

A New Religious Imagination for the Morning After or a New Science of the Human

Cavellian constraints on the new religious imagination

What would such a new imagination look like and how can it be found? Clearly, a simple strategy of nostalgic retrieval of pre-revolutionary, pre-Cartesian, or pre-Lutheran religion would not do. Such a project would be hermeneutically naive. Kristeva's analysis reminds us of the powerful philosophical insight of Freud's project. What we count as subjectivity is the product of individual and socio-cultural histories of desires. Those communal imaginaries about desire, autonomy, and religion are interwoven into the formation of modern subjectivity. Our reconstructions of the past are precisely *our* reconstructions and re-imaginations. Moreover, as Cavell's historical sketch showed, religious practice does not happen in a cultural vacuum. What we see and create as religious discourse and practice is woven into a complex web of epistemological, theological, and political practices. Finally, the quest for an 'original religion' itself seems nostalgic to my mind: looking back to one specific origin, which guarantees identity and fixes our place in the world provides no possibility for real stability in the present. Let me recall what Jonte-Pace said about Freud: 'always inquisitive about origins and beginnings, Freud raised questions of the identities of the first lost loves which the ego inscribes.'[84] I suspect that what gives rise to the never-ending inquisition of origins is the experience of a loss that inscribes identity. The Thing out of which language and self arises *is not*: it is not part of the world of language. It *is* only to the degree that it is lost. Like the mother, so too religion: 'original religion' for the modern subject is only available by fact of its absence. *The question, therefore, is not whether we can retrieve an original 'given' religious discourse, but whether we can re-imagine a discourse that allows us to talk about our uncanny origins as heirs of modernity and about our uncanny futures – we who carry the uprooted tree as our coat of arms.*

Instead of searching for original religion, I propose to read in a gesture of aversion the present (philosophical) imaginations of religion. The aversive focus will be on the *processes of subject-formation* and not on the results of stable subjectivity. To clarify the importance of this focus, I will highlight some of Kristeva's reflection on 'religion' and 'maternity.' To remind us of the importance of the strategy of aversion let me recall a Cavellian invocation of Nietzsche's Preface to the 1886 edition of *Human, All Too Human*: 'It may be conjectured that the decisive event for a spirit in whom the type of the "free spirit" is one day to ripen to sweet perfection has been a great separation, and that before it, he was probably all the more a bound spirit, and seemed to be chained forever to his corner, to his post' (section 3, quoted by Cavell in *AT*, p. 129).[85] This potential for separation is not the privilege of 'men of a high and select type,' as Nietzsche writes. Rather, Cavell's version of Perfectionism wishes to democratize the possibility to 'ask for each the right to seek a step toward an

84 Jonte-Pace, 'Situating Kristeva Differently,' p. 20.

85 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. Marion Faber (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

unattained possibility of the self' (*ibid*.). Together with this democratization comes also a move to the ordinary.[86] Separation from the bondage of fixed place comes through multiple acts performed and spoken in the course of our ordinary lives:

> If I ask myself whether Nietzsche's claim of separation is meant primarily as an epistemological or metaphysical or religious, or aesthetic or psychic or political or moral task, I find I am glad to reply – glad only to reply – that it is precisely all of these, all the time. But that means to me that every word we utter, or withhold, is an act capable of responsiveness within at least these registers. No wonder philosophy is in fear of the ordinary word. [*AT*, p. 131]

Thus, with Cavell, I assume that the possibility for new religious imagination appears in the complex nature of the ordinary. This imagination will and does appear in the context of ordinary words spoke and words withheld. A first step in outlining the potential for such imagination is therefore recalling what Cavell's attention to the possibility and impossibility of having words yielded.

Cavell rejects the idea of theological authentication of human existence. Against this kind of 'place-holder-God,' Cavell posits the diva and the melodrama's star. They speak both from this (painful) world and are silent to it from a place beyond it. Thus, in our analysis it appears that Descartes is both right and wrong: Descartes is right in assuming that a guarantee of humanity comes from beyond finite humanity; he is wrong in assuming that this guarantee stabilizes things and wards off the unpredictability of the beyond. It is not human existence that is the issue but a religious imagination surrounding the fears of becoming human. Not unlike Nietzsche, Cavell claims that the fantasy of God as authenticator of the human is part and parcel of the skeptical idea of the human. The task is thus not accepting the death of God but overcoming the idea of the human that created the desire for an existence-granting divine.

At this point we encounter a double bind: first, what would it mean to overcome the idea of the human as being in need of creation? What could be the alternative? Apparently, the idea of accepting the present existence of the human as given (by nature or by divine order) is not a viable path. Secondly, what would it mean *not* to overcome it? The Romantic fantasy that a finite human being carries the weight – and bears the brunt – of the existence-proving God leads either to complacency or to madness:

> One text from which to decipher the significance of our suffocating from the half-swallowed apple of knowledge is Kleist's 'Marionette Theater.' Is being human exactly to be incapable either of swallowing it or spitting it out? Is the gasping of the human voice, say sobbing or laughing, the best proof of the human? Or best picture, i.e., mask? To swallow once and for all would be to live always within ordinary language-games,

86 'I say that for Wittgenstein the redemption of culture from decline goes on, for philosophy, diurnally. I am alluding to that claim for Wittgenstein in contrasting Nietzsche's metaphysics with Emerson's everyday.' Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, p. 214. Giles Fraser makes a similar point in his analysis of Nietzschean soteriology. Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 164ff.

> within the everyday; to spit once and for all would be to exist apart from just that life, to live without. In particular, to live without the human voice (e.g., without appeal, without protest). [*CR*, p. 477]

From what we saw previously, the diva and the stars of the melodramas seem to inhabit this space between completely spitting it out and completely swallowing the apple of knowledge. Cavell's diagnosis of the human condition does not aim at solving the impasse between overcoming and not overcoming the skeptical vision of the human. Situating the human *between* the time of day and the time of night, not negating the human (and thus negating the desire for an existence proving divinity), is Cavell's project. The star lives within the everyday – yet she imagines herself in aversion to it. The diva sings from the pain that ensues from being positioned apart from that same quotidian existence – and she sings in aversion and judgment of that exclusion.

In this positioning of the female star I see three important shifts in the religious issues at stake. First, the diva and the women in the melodramas are not evoked to authenticate human existence. Rather, they sing and expose themselves as authorizing human becoming from a space that remains beyond them. No guarantee that we are in fact (and always remain) human is provoked by Cavell's history of the skeptical life. It offers instead a variety of possible means for us to become human. Secondly, and connected to this longing for human becoming, the placement of the diva and the star between worlds acknowledges that overcoming the skeptical vision of humanity involves mourning and pain. Overcoming the old (skeptical) idea of the human is a process of becoming itself. As such, it involves a subtle movement of acknowledgement and negation of the pain that leaving the old image of the human implies. What Kristeva wrote about the 'child-king' and his loss of the mother pertains in Cavell's Thoreauvian vision of becoming human, as well. Before the child can find the mother again in the worlds of signs (thereby negating the loss of her) he has to become inconsolably sad. Likewise, it is only through sadness, aversion, and mourning that the religious and epistemological fantasy of the old-human can be left behind. Finally, the new imagination of the human, like the subjectivity archived through abjection, carries the instability of its becoming.

A path to mourning and morning

In this tuition of the diva we can see an image of the human as being extended between both mourning and morning. This tense relationship of sadness and becoming also informs Kristeva's process of abjection and with it her characterization of religious imagination: 'Abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse. Several structurings of abjection should be distinguished, each one determining a specific form of the sacred.'[87] She proceeds by declaring that

87 Kristeva's other explicit remarks on religion, and on Christianity particular, are ambivalent and at times strange. In 'About Chinese Women,' Kristeva claims that monotheism uses the radical separation of the sexes in order to maintain its unity (p. 141f.). Later she writes that fascist and 'all homosexual communities for whom there is no "other race"' and

> ... the various means of *purifying* the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions.[88]

This grand evolutionary model of *the* history of religions, with the neat disjunction of monotheism and paganism and with the clear sense that historical forms of religions are destined to collapse, is clearly rather speculative. The idea that there is a 'crisis in Christianity' affecting contemporary practice makes no sense if we consider the growth of Christian practice outside the North Atlantic cultural nexus; nor does it make sense given the continued overt and implicit presence of protestant Christian values and practices in US political discourse. To think that this crisis of Christianity in certain segments of Western European society indicates a universal collapse of 'the historical forms of religions' is curiously reductive at best. Yet, intertwined with this history of decline are celebratory passages about the power of religion. For Kristeva the function of imaginary discourse in general (and Christianity in particular) lies in their provision of a 'tense link between Thing and Meaning, the unnamable and a proliferation of signs, the silent affect and the ideality that designates and goes beyond it.'[89] Oliver comments 'In these extreme moments in Kristeva's texts, moments marinated in Christian/Catholic imagery, moments in which humankind is fulfilled by Christianity, a dangerous ethnocentrism is on the prowl.'[90] Given this interlacing of a narrative of decline of religion and a celebration of religious imagination, Oliver asks: 'Could Kristeva be nostalgic for the power of the old sacred? Could she be the melancholic atheist mourning the death of God?' Oliver quickly denies this possibility by citing Kristeva's statement that she is not nostalgic for religion, but rather interested in questioning what 'can take the place of *this* religious discourse.'[91]

Finding what replaces *this* religious discourse, which is born out of the myth of conveyability, implies, as we have seen, the tasks of mourning. Nostalgia for the old sacred would not lead to mourning; rather it would arrest Kristeva in an unproductive denial of loss. Her project is not one of romantic retrieval of a lost past, at least not in the sense that this past itself is conceived as simply given (as if we had to revive simpler times when God had not left). Such nostalgia is not a

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'the feminist movements are equally capable of a similar perverse denial of biblical teaching. We must recognize this and be on our guard' (Julia Kristeva, 'About Chinese Women,' in Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, pp. 138–59, pp. 141f, 145.)

In *Black Sun* and *In the Beginning Was Love* she uses ample Christian images to describe the psychoanalytic process – forgiveness being one of them. As Oliver writes, 'forgiveness constitutes a loving bond with a non-judgmental other who "allows me to be reborn"' (Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 130).

88 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 17.

89 Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love*, p. 131.

90 Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 131.

91 Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 132, italics added.

form of mourning leading to morning and new imaginations. Like the child who is in the process of leaving mother behind and of finding her again in signs, Kristeva's abject and Cavell's divas represent a loss that is both experienced and negated. The possibility of replacing *this* religious discourse of conveyability with another one implies morning and negating the loss by finding what was lost in an alternate religious imagination.

Admitting to the limits of psychoanalysis, Kristeva outlines the contours of the loss of what, according to her, was once captured by religious imagination:

> Aesthetic and particularly literary creation, and also religious discourse in its imaginary, fictional essence, set forth a device whose prosodic economy, interaction of characters, and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject's battle with symbolic collapse ... The literary (and religious) representation possesses a real and imaginary effectiveness that comes closer to catharsis than to elaboration ... If psychoanalysts think they are more efficacious, notably through strengthening the subject's cognitive possibilities, they also owe it to themselves to enrich their practice by paying greater attention to these sublimatory solutions to our crises, in order to be lucid counterdepressants rather than neutralizing antidepressants.[92]

Kristeva concedes that literary and religious imaginations are effective in preventing the fall into depression. As an anti-depressive, the effectiveness of psychoanalysis rests on elaboration – on making explicit and thus helping the analyzed to become aware 'of the inter- and intrapsychic causes of moral suffering.' Yet, I wish to claim that the object of Kristeva's suffering cannot be made fully explicit. As we have seen, the 'abject' cannot be made into an object of language. Only after the fact (that is, after the act of abjecting) can it be imagined. Thus, it is not by chance that Kristeva continues her claims about the effectiveness of religious sublimation and psychoanalytic elaboration by asking 'is death representable?' And she concludes that 'the unrepresentable nature of death was linked with that of the other unrepresentable – original abode but also with last resting place for dead souls, in the beyond – which, for mythical thought, is constituted by the female body.'[93] Reflecting on the modern intellectual position and, at the same time, mirroring the loss enshrined in this position, Kristeva is again led to the body of the mother. This is the body of a mother who is imagined as being the repository of dead souls and as the stand-in for both death and the unrepresentable beyond. Here she finds 'more archaic resonances,' prior to the Christian discourse of sin and redemption.[94] Like Nerval's poetry, her analysis is brought to the brink of the symbolic – and given her cultural situation she imagines this brink in terms of the 'archaic resonances' of the mother's body.

Both Cavell's and Kristeva's texts perform an exploration in the possibility of human becoming on the border between originality and death. In so doing they highlight the problematic of what it means to draw a border and live with the pains and possibilities of becoming human. The notion of the abject thematizes, on the

92 Kristeva, *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, p. 24f.

93 *Ibid*., pp. 24–7.

94 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 17.

one hand, the perils of existence as being permanently in flux; on the other hand abjection sheds light on the constant reality of becoming. To reiterate what I said earlier about the abject as relation: the abject is not an object, a stable identifiable entity to be desired (or not to be desired). The abject is not excluded firmly enough to become an object and the self is not established firmly enough to face it as other. At the same time, the abject is not nothing. Rather the abject is a no-thing. The abject is a relationship defined by the act of bordering. As such, the abject moves the focus of our concerns away from the state of being toward the process of becoming through differentiation. It is through drawing (and maintaining) distinctions and borders that the modern subject comes into being. In my reading the tensions in Kristeva's text between celebrating religious and Christian imagery and lamenting the decline of 'historical religion' are expressive of the mourning and morning in the process of becoming. If we can identify 'historical religion' with the epistemological and theological complex of Cavell's history of religion, then we can connect Kristeva's story about the decline of historical religion: the craving for conveyability is itself the expression of the skeptical life, whether or not this craving is imagined as theologically fulfilled. This form of religion is not so much 'in decline' (as if it had seen better and more convincing days) as it is itself an expression of the skeptical disappointment. As disappointment, the existence-proving God appears always too late. I read Kristeva therefore as juxtaposing the processes of abjection with the disappointment inherent in historical religion.

In 'Stabat Mater,' Kristeva fantasizes about matriarchal civilizations before the onset of violent patriarchal civilizations and their inventions of singularity.[95] Interpreting her as an historian of the symbolic events that gave rise to the skeptical (or metaphysical) life, I find these fantasies convincing. They probe into what lies before or beyond the epistemic and theological plausibilities producing and reinforcing the skeptical history. In Christian and other religious imagery Kristeva finds traces of pre-historical imagination (historical in the sense of Cavell's theological and epistemological history of skepticism). Similar to the appearance of the image of the ambiguous mother in the lacunae of Freud's Oedipus story, we can now see an alternate religious imagination in the lacunae of the skeptical narrative. Underneath the obsession with the Father-God of existence lies the evasion of the process of abjecting the Thing. Finding new representations for this process requires working

95 Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater,' p. 135. The French version printed in *Histoires de L'Amour*, begins the essay with the subtitle: 'The Paradox: Mother or Primary Narcissism?' (p. 295). Kristeva's reworking of the Oedipal master story implies a reinterpretation of the Freudian concept of narcissism. For the later Freud, primary narcissism refers to a stage in the child's development when the child comprises the totality of its universe. This stage is therefore prior to the formation of objects and of the ego. (The problem with Freud's conception of primary narcissism is, needless to say, that it is hard to conceive of a primary identification without some form of object of identification or subject performing the act of identifying [ego].) Secondary narcissism in contrast is a pathological regression into this early developmental state. Here the ego retreats from the world of objects. Let us recall from our discussion of Cavell that the secondary narcissism of the diva constituted a defense mechanism against a world that had no place for her words. Retreating into the object-less world was the only way in which she could gain herself (cf. Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 71).

through the paradoxical mythologies of motherhood that both cover the paternal obsessions and uncover alternate imaginations in aversion to them.

Kristeva opens 'Stabat Mater' by pointing out a paradox that arises in the language of motherhood and femininity. The socially ordained representation of femininity is motherhood. This motherhood is, as we have seen, the product of a '*fantasy* nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory.' Folded into this fantasy of loss is an idealization of the '*relationship* that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized – and idealization of primary narcissism.'[96] This fantasy of primary narcissism stands in the way of thinking and talking about the feminine. In consequence the 'real experience' of motherhood remains overlooked.[97] Kristeva explores the fissures of this representation of motherhood in her essay. How to access the experience of maternal becoming? And what would it meant to represent this experience?

Her essay about the experience of 'maternity' is famously written in two columns. One echoes Kristeva's personal experiences of both natality and death during her pregnancy – the two jointly signifying the process of becoming. The parallel column reflects on how the symbolic system of Western Christianity assumed this core experience. This structure invites both a quick representation of Kristeva's theory of language and an ironic comment on itself. At first glance, the left-hand column written in at times rhythmic and poetic phrases seems to represent the semiotic in its defiance of clear syntax and in its evocative and personal (even intimate) invitation to imagination. The right-hand column, recounting a theological reflection on Mary's motherhood and virginity in Western Christianity, reads like a scholarly treatise should read. It presents an erudite, grammatically well-formed text with a clear logical progression and a detached tone of voice. It therefore seems to represent the symbolic and the masculine modality of language while the left-hand column stands for the semiotic and maternal or feminine modality. Yet such a clear identification of the symbolic and the semiotic overlooks the fact that the semiotic is always present in all language use. It is the dialogue of the symbolic and semiotic as modalities that make language possible. In perhaps an ironic move, Kristeva says the following in the first footnote to the more 'symbolic' part of the text: 'Between the lines of this section one should be able to detect the presence of Marina Warner.' A female theologian is speaking within the 'symbolic' and 'male' text. Moreover, we should take a hint from Kristeva's use of 'between the lines.' The female voice is audible only 'between' the lines of the male symbolic – or as the French text says 'within the lacunae' of the article [*dans les lacunes*]. In fact, the left column 'evolves' more and more into a linear text, thereby leaving the opacity of its poetry behind and entering into a space of clear grammar and meaning. At the same time, while we might not choose to acknowledge it, this female voice is audible in the lacunae. The semiotic (or the feminine) enables and informs (potentially transforms) the symbolic. The lacunae and their voices are always present.

Where does this leave the reader who faces an impossible and frustrating task? Using Cavell's understanding of reading, we can ask, 'Who are we supposed to be in the eyes of this text? How does this text analyze us?' Do I start first with one

96 Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater,' p. 161.

97 Jonte-Pace, *Speaking the Unspeakable*, p. 2.

column and read the columns sequentially. Do I jump from one to the other? Using this text in various academic seminars, I found that most students read the 'more rational' or 'more scholarly' column without even glancing at the 'other one.' When asked to reflect on their choice students usually mention that the 'more symbolic side' is closer to what they are trained to read. 'It makes more sense.' More than just exhibiting a certain *deformation professionelle* these responses show that the semiotic modality of language is in most instances (especially in the production of 'good' scholarship) repressed. In order 'to make sense' according to the symbolic order, we chose not to 'see' the semiotic. Given our Cavellian reading of language, we should ask what counts 'as making sense' and 'who does the counting?' In what type of context or in what type of world is 'meaning' or 'sense' construed in such a way that it demands from us the repression of the non-linear, poetic, or, in short, semiotic mode of language? On the other hand, what if our professional leanings encouraged us to read the left-hand column in the French version with its rhymes of 'vision, frission and embryon'? What if (trained by reading *Ulysses*) we found it natural to muse about the connections between 'informé' and information? The standard English translation, forcing us to read 'a vision, a shiver, a yet formless, unnamable embryo,' makes impossible the question of whether being informed and being without form has any connection. Even in this case, I assume that reading the entire essay would be frustrating. The scholarly enumerations are dry and listless and a decision still has to be made as to what to read first, how to continue, and whether or not to read the 'other' column at all. Moreover, the poetic force of the right column disappears. And in the process of reading the left column, it is impossible to 'keep in mind' the web of meanings creating the right column and vice versa. Built into the essay is the experience that there is always more, that there are always new and rejected possibilities of creating meaning, and that, at the same time, there remains always something else, something unfulfilled. Thus, this text 'about' maternity weaves together and apart. The essay weaves the 'semiotic' into the 'symbolic,' and in turn it weaves the style of grammar into the experiential account of maternity. 'Stabat Mater' weaves together theological scholarship on the role of the Virgin Mother, and personal reflections on the experience of having another grow inside the mother's body. Simultaneously, the essay creates an experience of frustration and expectation – splitting the reader's attention into the right-hand or the left-hand column. Finally, the essay pulls the reader of each column away from the poetic, the obscure and from whimsical individuality.

This experience of reading speaks to the experience of maternity in language. On the one hand the text raises the question, 'What happens to the personal individual experience of motherhood if this experience is expressed in the symbolic system which is part of the paternal order?' On the other hand, the frustrating reading experience produces a split-reader, one confronted with an excess or a frustration in her or his attempts to understand the bipartite systems of expression. This readerly fission provides a counterpoint to the unifying fantasy of the 'son' desiring the mother. The 'maternal' is not the unifying and unified ground of the son's desire – and the mother's desires are not one and the same. Freud's fantasy of the 'mother-son' relationship as unambiguous reveals its underside. By listening to the lacunae in this fantasy, we can examine the meaning of the maternal – a meaning which, through its

horror, seems to be driving this fantasy of the Oedipal master-plot. Kristeva writes, 'let us call "maternal" the ambivalent principle that is bound to the species, on the one hand, and on the other stems from an identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnamable that one imagines as femininity, non-language, or body.'[98] Unfortunately, the English translation blurs the ambivalence about which Kristeva speaks. She contrasts, on the one hand, the 'Nom [sic] propre,' the proper name denoting singularity, with the maternal as link to the species being of humanity – its biological and general principle.[99] Later in the essay's left-hand column, Kristeva writes about the conundrum of singularity from the perspective of the daughter:

> Women doubtless reproduce among themselves the strange gamut of forgotten body relationships with their mothers. Complicity in the unspoken, connivance of the inexpressible, of a wink, a tone of voice, a gesture, a tinge, a scent. We are in it, set free of our identification papers and names, on an ocean of preciseness, a computerization of the unnamable. No communication between individuals but connections between atoms, molecules, wisps of words, droplets of sentences. The community of women is a community of dolphins. Conversely, when the other woman posits herself as such, that is, as singular and inevitably in opposition, 'I' am startled, so much that 'I' no longer know what is going on.[100]

We see here a negotiation of belonging and separation. Kristeva examines the various forms in which to negotiate belonging, forms that go beyond 'identification papers,' that is, the tools of establishing singularity within the symbolic system of the state and of the Law. She finds multiple connections, lines of belonging, and multiple lines of identity. Later in the essay she writes:

> [T]he languages of the great formerly matriarchal civilizations must avoid, do avoid personal pronouns: they leave to the context the burden of distinguishing protagonists and take refuge in tones to recover an underwater, transverbal communication between bodies. It is a music from which so-called oriental civility tears ways suddenly through violence, murder, blood baths.[101]

These multiple lines of belonging, connecting, and consequently separating are a counter-image to the idea of one-ness. The seam replaces the image of the hermetically sealed border. The desire for singularity, for Kristeva in 'Stabat Mater' (on the left side of the text) constitutes

> ... the unacceptable ambition to be something other than a child or a fold in the plasma that constitutes us, an echo of the cosmos that unifies us. What an inconceivable ambition it is to aspire to singularity, it is not natural, hence it is inhuman; the mania smitten with Oneness ('There is only One woman') can only impugn it by condemning it as 'masculine' ... Within

98 Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater,' p. 162.

99 'Appelons "maternel" le principe ambivalent qui tient, d'une part, de l'espéce, de l'autre – d'une catastrophe d'identité quit fait basculer le Nom propre dans cet innommable qu'on imagine comme de la féminínité, du non-langage ou du corps,' Kristeva, *Histoires D'Amour*, p. 296.

100 Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater,' p. 180.

101 *Ibid*., p. 182.

> this strange feminine see-saw that makes 'me' swing from the unnamable community of women over to the war of individual singularities, it is unsettling to say 'I.'[102]

Kristeva points to a possibility and a danger at the heart of our individual subject formation in modernity: the seesaw makes 'me' swing from an un-nameable community to the wars of singularity. This oscillation, which is accessible through and repressed into feminine experience, lies at the heart of the psycho-dynamics forming the modern visions of language and self. At the same time, Kristeva finds in these dynamics of folding and unfolding of subjectivity an alternative (and repressed) imagination of becoming human through bordering or differentiation.

A new religious imagination for the morning after tomorrow

The new archaic imagination is related to the multiplicity of belonging and connections that Kristeva fantasizes into the language of the great matriarchal civilizations. I see allegory or imagination as a linguistic strategy to 'displace, illumine and dissolve' the pain that is connected to the impossible demands of Western philosophy on woman and on the mother.[103] For her, imagination is the sober strategy by which a new religious discourse can unite the pain of loss with the jouissance of endless new possibilities and beginnings. 'The imaginary,' Kristeva writes, 'constitutes a miracle, but it is at the same time its shattering: a self-illusion, nothing but dreams and words, words, words ... It affirms the almightiness of temporary subjectivity – the ones that knows enough to speak until death comes.'[104]

In the title-giving essay of his *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow*, Cavell quotes Nietzsche to describe the philosopher as someone who 'has always found himself, and *had* to find himself, in contradiction to his today.'[105] For Cavell, the diva or the star inhabits the position of necessary contradiction to the today. They judge the world from a place beyond the world of today. They judge from the perspective of the 'morning after today' (the after-, super, or over-morning to follow Cavell's rendering of the German 'Übermorgen'). In 'Stabat Mater,' Kristeva uncovers in her fantasy of archaic webs of belonging a counter-image to the world dominated by the obsession with privacy. In so doing she fulfills what Cavell writes about the philosopher. 'The idea is that the further- or over-morning is the day realized, reconceived, by the further- or over-man; and contrariwise, that the over-man is one who realizes such day.'[106] Through her aversive reading of the mythologies of motherhood and subject-formation, Kristeva points to the imaginary from which to judge, mourn, and re-create her world. Thus realizing the morning after requires not so much an alternate time but an attitude of aversion to the present.

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102 *Ibid*., p. 182.

103 Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love*, p. 7.

104 Kristeva, *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, p. 104.

105 Friederich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: A Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York: Vintage, 1966). Cavell, Stanley, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 117.

106 Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater,' p. 118.

Recalling Cavell's invocation of Nietzschean separation, we see furthermore the interconnectedness of the tasks of creating new philosophical anthropologies and new religious imaginations. As Cavell stated, the task of separation reverberates in the registers of metaphysics, epistemology, religion, aesthetic, psychology, ethics and political science (*AT*, p. 131). Thus, reading Kristeva after reading Cavell can help trace how the epistemological and psychological quest for new human imaginations evoked religious imaginations and vice versa. We can learn from Kristeva's 'Stabat Mater' how the emergence of a new vision of human subjectivity is involved in probing for a new religious imagination that supports human becoming through the processes of bordering. This insight echoes the role of Cavell's divas or stars who, by singing from a space beyond themselves, indict the present state of humanity and insist on newness. We cannot, however, learn from these texts the precise contours of 'human becoming,' or of 'the' religious imagination. Trying to find something like fixed identifiable spheres of identity or characteristics (*this is* the new imagination) would go against the grain of the project of focusing on 'becoming' and not on existence.

Instead of pointing to 'this' or 'that' as the new religious imagination, we should pay attention to the processes that transform mourning into a new morning. Following Kristeva's attention to the lacunae of texts and Cavell's insistence on focusing on the extended position of the diva produces a shift in the philosophical terrain. Attention to these moments of becoming intervenes into the oscillations of total passivity and activity; between transcendence and immanence; autonomy and heteronomy; or privacy and communality that characterized the skeptical view of the human. These oscillation are driven by the fantasy of inviolate and clearly drawn borders, thus of privacy or singularity. In contrast, Cavell's placement of the diva highlights and thematizes the problematic nature of the border of her world and her beyond; and Kristeva's focus on the process of abjection thematizes the paradoxical and painful nature of bordering in the process of subject-formation (I am both the mother-Thing and I am not). While many of Cavell's texts talk about the need and difficulty of separation and aversion we can read these works (as well as Kristeva's 'abjection') as reflection on the difficulty of the acts of bordering. The illusion of the clearly present and clearly maintained border masks the messy and complicated processes of differentiation. Cavell's image of the separating scar that becomes the seam uniting Desdemona and Othello is a perspicuous representation of the problematic and promising act of bordering (of drawing or inhabiting distinction and being both connected and separated). This attention to the act of bordering itself does not sublate the aforementioned oscillations into a higher dialectic. Rather, placing a new focus on the dynamics of bordering invites philosophy to rethink the central ingredients of the modern skeptic's fantasy of self. What are alternate imaginations of autonomy bordering heteronomy; of connected subjectivity; or of humanity bordering a beyond that is part of us? What Cavell said about Nietzschean separation holds true here as well. The tasks of imagining these alternatives, provokes echoes over the web of philosophical disciplines (metaphysics, epistemology, religion, aesthetic, psychology, ethics, and political theory). As in Kristeva's fantasy, in our ordinary acts of speaking (or not-speaking) to one another we can find multiple ways in which these connecting borders are drawn and inhabited. There will be no

one single set of acts of bordering. The day after tomorrow is already present in our ordinary acts of speaking and living.

Cavell comments (again in his reflection on Nietzsche), 'No wonder philosophy lives in fear of the ordinary word. It is to be determined in each case whether the fear is a healthy one' (*AT*, p. 131). On the surface this fear may relate to something like the academic conflict of faculties. Here are the ones who study philosophy and here are those who study aesthetics, or those who study religion. And since their individual subject matters are perceived as unrelated, these disciplines cannot meaningfully interact. One consequence of Cavell's broad vision of the resonances of the ordinary word is therefore a muddling of the departmental clarity of our academic enterprises. For him it makes sense to refer to film and literature when talking to a gathering of professional philosophers. With respect to the perhaps even more problematic relationship between philosophical and religious imaginations of the human, my reading of Cavell and Kristeva provokes the claim that these borders need reconsideration as well. At the heart of Cavell's Emersonian ethos of self-creation and aversion lies a rejection of the idea that human existence can be guaranteed through the divine. Without the loss of this type of religious imagination no move into responsibility and autonomy is possible. Without these lost (and imaginary) theological origins there are no new beginnings. As Kristeva writes:

> The imaginary world [in the Western tradition] as signified sadness but also, the other way around, as nostalgic signifying jubilation over a fundamental, nutritive nonmeaning [sic!] is nevertheless the very universe of the *possible*. Possibility of evil as perversion and of death as ultimate nonmeaning. Furthermore, and on account of the meaning maintained during the fading away period, there is the infinite possibility of ambivalent, polyvalent resurrections.[107]

The meaning that fades away in the experience of loss *together with the realization* of 'nutritive nonmeaning' (the Thing) allows for infinite possibility. Thus, combining mourning the loss of the old sacred with new possibilities and thereby *naming* the experience of loss, frees language up to provide new satisfaction within the acknowledgment of loss of satisfying meaning. The world of imagination signifies not only a lost object but it also enables us to tap into the sources of non-meaning. Through this linguistic strategy, which Kristeva identifies as allegoric, the experience of loss is prevented from becoming an experience of death; the experience of loosening the connection between Thing and word is prevented from becoming an experience of non-meaning. Extrapolating from Benjamin's *Ursprünge des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, Kristeva writes:

> [A]llegory is a terseness of meanings between their depression/depreciation and their signifying exaltation (*Venus* becomes the allegory of Christian love). It endows the lost signifier with a signifying pleasure, a resurrectional jubilation even to the stone and corpse, by asserting itself as coextensive with the subjective experience of a named melancholia – of melancholy jouissance.[108]

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107 Kristeva, *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, p. 101.

108 *Ibid*., p. 102.

Allegory or imagination is the strategy mirroring the child's negotiations while losing the mother's breast. The loss is denied: 'I found her again' in imagination and in words. 'The child king becomes irredeemably sad before uttering his first words,' wrote Kristeva earlier in *Black Sun*, 'this is because he has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother, *a loss that causes him to try to find her again, along with other objects of love, first in the imagination, then in words*.'[109] The task of redrawing the boundaries between new philosophical and alternate religious imaginations of the human involves therefore losing and rereading the inherited master-texts in aversion. As Kristeva demonstrated, it is through reading 'between the lines' of these texts that we find novel images and ultimately new meanings in new words. This kind of imagination suggested by our analysis can deny the loss through a regaining of the lost object in allegories and pluralities while acknowledging the underlying pain. The identification with the lost object is not total, abjection of the religious past can happen. Yet at the same time the sadness and implied violence of the experience of loss is also *nameable* in a discourse different from the Freudian or contemporary narratives of motherhood.

Evidently, letting this new religious imagination appear is not only the task of the philosopher. Neither is the focus on aversive reading Cavell's or Kristeva's exclusive domain. The reworking of religious imagination through aversion motivates feminist scholars of religion such as Mary Daley, Judith Plaskow, or Elisabeth Schüssler to name only three founding figures for this discipline.[110] At the same time, cultural anthropologists describe alternative religious imaginations of religion in contemporary religious narratives and practices. Karen McCarthy Brown, for example, describes the narrative strategies of Mama Lola, a Voodoo priestess living in Brooklyn, New York. In her tales, songs, and ritualizations we encounter nostalgia for the lost (and mythological) Africa, a self-conscious blending of ritual and cultural elements, and a constant creativity in the drawing and negotiating of boundaries. Her religious imagination reflects the Cavellian theme of scarring and seaming.[111] I briefly mention these works in the study of religion to point out that the quest for new religious imaginations is not to be reduced to the canon of theological Western literature. I wish to reiterate that the material for the new religious imagination is present. Importantly, it is present in the varied textures of what we came to call religious lives. Like Kristeva who immersed herself in representations of the Virgin, philosophers can and should pay attention to the representations and practices of contemporary religious life. Attention to the ordinary can prevent us from mistakenly turning the 'task of religion as a criticism of life' into a decontextualized celebration of 'via negativa.'[112] These and other similar practices and texts, read

109 *Ibid*., p. 6, italics added.

110 Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1978); Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai. Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone. The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984).

111 Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola. A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California, 1991).

112 This celebration seems to lie at the heart of Derrida's reflection on religion. While it would be worthwhile to delineate the exact differences between Emersonian avoidance and

with a philosophical awareness for the issue of bordering, broaden the question, 'What does philosophy and what does religion mean in a post-skeptical context?' Answering it will require a wider dialogue that transcends the accepted disciplinary boundaries between the faculties. Constructive theologians, philosophers, scholars of religion, literary theorists, and historians, among others, are already engaged in this blurring of academic boundaries. Part of this dialogue implies a critical examination of the genealogy and contours of the concept of religion that is operative in many academic endeavors. Moreover, this dialogue demands a philosophical reflection on the fate of religious imagination in the context of encountering, understanding, and overcoming skepticism. Our reading of Cavell (in conversation with Kristeva) helped us begin such a reflection from the perspective of epistemology and the philosophical reimagination of the human. In so doing Cavell moves philosophy beyond its accustomed skeptical borders. Without such a dialogue about what counts as religious imagination, can philosophy still be itself?

Derridian 'via negativa' such a project would go beyond the confines of this book. Cf. Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

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